

The multi-sensory experience of walking in nature's stillness: a case study in the Italian countryside



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Abstract

This thesis explores the multi-sensory experience of tourists while walking in nature-based environments, focusing specifically on hikes in the Italian countryside. By employing concepts like slowness, therapeutic landscapes, sensory experience and stillness, this study aims to investigate individuals' perception of stillness and their travel motivations during a slow-paced and immersive activity in nature. By taking an interpretivist approach, walking interviews, participant observation and fieldnotes were employed as research methods, thereby fostering a better understanding of individuals' experiences. The findings reveal that walks in nature offer an escape from daily routine due to the restorative experience enhanced by sensory engagement. Sight, hearing, smell and touch enrich sensations, like freedom, belonging, nostalgia and mindfulness, whilst the natural soundscape and silent background fosters the perception of stillness in nature. Furthermore, walking as an embodied practice enhances self-reflection and social interaction, given by moments of solitude and shared experience with others. Overall, this study demonstrates the importance of multisensory immersion in shaping the experience of restoration while walking in nature-based settings. Moreover, its relevance also lies in providing evidence on the human-nature therapeutic interaction within the tourism context, specifically on slow adventure activities, like walking.

Keywords - slow adventures; walking experience; therapeutic landscape; sensory experience; stillness in nature; rural setting

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Chapter I: Introduction

Nowadays, people are constantly racing through their everyday lives, bringing quality of life and psychological wellbeing under great pressure (Farkic et al., 2020). Recently, the tourism industry has been trying to foster new experiences for tourists based on natural environments. Promoting more greener destination and activities that make people to slow down, may help them to overcome the cult of speed and embrace a more slow-paced rhythm. Slow tourism emerged as a new trend from the so-called *Slow Movement*, with the aim to rediscover places, reconnect with people and nature as well as live a more meaningful life (Moirira et al., 2017, p.3, italics added). The concept of slowing down, or slowness, has been deployed in tourism by focusing on experiences in remote, rural or natural spaces, offering tourists the qualities they seek and extending time to enjoy them (Heitmann et al., 2011). The idea of travelling and exploring a destination at a slower pace also means that people tend to observe and perceive the natural environment with all their senses. Therefore, experiencing nature with all senses, especially by focusing on the sound of silence, can provide restoring experience for those who live in busy environments (Komppula et al., 2017). Spending time in quiet or silent surroundings provides a chance to relax and listen more clearly in a slow-paced environment. Therefore, the action of seeking silence in nature may be seen as a premises for practicing slow tourism activities. The concept of stillness has also been adopted to encompass the qualities of an environment, such as tranquillity, calmness and peacefulness that reflect our inner self state (Doughty, 2023). Hence, being immerse in nature may also be beneficial for enhancing people's wellbeing.

Slow adventures are one form of slower activity in the tourism sector that can provide ways of spending time in nature, fostering mindfulness and deeper connection with the environment (Sheldon, 2020). Walking is an example of slow-paced activity that can be carried out in natural settings, thus representing the focus of this research. As a form of everyday movement, it can have an influence on people's wellbeing, either positively or negatively (Gatrell, 2013). Therefore, it is important to understand the possible short- and long-term effects of people on their wellbeing when undertaking a walking experience. Consequently, the main purpose of this paper is to uncover the experience of tourists while walking in nature-based environments by looking at their multi-sensory experience. More specifically, the focus will be on the immediate experience, including all the feelings, emotions, and sense of embodiment aroused from the walking experience in relation to their surrounding environment. Then, the attention will be directed towards tourists' motivations to pursue a walking experience in order to understand the perceived difference with their everyday life experience.

Problem statement

Urbanisation is a phenomenon that has affected many people's life. As people move from rural to urban areas, the space for natural features has drastically decreased. As cities became more crowded, polluted and stressful, individuals are less exposed to the natural world (Dye, 2008). These factors have led to an increase in chronic conditions, such as poor physical and mental health, including stress. As a result, people have developed a desire to escape from the noise of urban environments to the quietness of natural environments. Individuals are now searching for nature-based experiences that can help them to overcome their stressful routine and improve their wellbeing. For example, slow adventure activities are considered beneficial for people's psychological wellbeing by providing spaces for rest and relaxation (Farkic et al., 2020). Understanding the impact of urbanisation on nature experiences and the associated effects on wellbeing and health is crucial for tourism studies.

Similarly, Doughty (2023) mentions in her article that stillness, described as a desire to pause from the fast pace of modern life, has become more difficult to find, especially in the light of urbanisation. This sense of peace and tranquillity could also help the body and mind to cope with the pressures of daily life. For instance, the experience of stillness in nature provides a period of respite from real life responsibilities (Bissell & Fuller 2010). Therefore, investigating individuals' desire for natural experiences and stillness in nature is crucial, especially in the context of tourism. More attention also needs to be directed towards the senses. Several studies on tourism and hospitality refer to external stimuli, including social and natural encounters as well as sensory impressions, as for enhancing tourists' experiences and perceived wellbeing (Agapito et al., 2021; Tasci & Pizam, 2020). However, referring to Doughty's article (2023), there is still a lack of information on the impact of sensory elements and stillness on tourist practices. Therefore, further research is needed to explore the multisensory experience of stillness in natural environments, and whether it is significant in a specific slow-paced practice, namely walking.

The present study's is structured around several key components. First, a literature review section aims to explore a range of concepts, including slowness, therapeutic landscapes, the senses and stillness, thus providing a basis for constructing the conceptual framework. This model supports the formulation of the main and sub-research questions. Then, a methodology section outlines the study area, and the methods used for data collection and analysis. The findings section includes the most important and relevant results from the interviews. This is followed by a discussion chapter in which these findings have been supported by the literature, while also considering further research prompts and limitations. Finally, a conclusion chapter summarises the research by answering the main and sub-questions.

Chapter II: Literature review

The main purpose of this section is to describe and analyse different concepts in order to develop a conceptual framework that explains the research objectives. Firstly, the concept of slowness is outlined in relation to tourism. Secondly, the relationship between places and wellbeing is explained through the concept of therapeutic landscape. Thirdly, the practice of walking is specifically described in relation to its embodied, social and cultural dimensions. Finally, the sensory dimension of tourists' experiences and the concept of stillness are described.

The experience of slowness in tourism

Slowness is a concept that emphasises the importance of time in consuming and appreciating experiences in everyday life (Farkic & Taylor, 2019). This notion derives from the Slow Food Movement, which was born in Italy with the aim of allowing people to enjoy local and healthy food (Krešić & Gjurašić, 2022). In response to the fast-paced rhythm of life, the concept of slowness was extended towards urban life aspects and travelling as well. Hence, slow travel underlines the simple, traditional, sensory and affective aspects of experiences through slower pace movements and immersion in places (Farkic & Taylor, 2019). Those who adopt this travel lifestyle often utilize walking as a mode of exploration, which allows them to slow down and further immerse themselves into the place (Rabbiosi, 2021). While slow travel refers to the tourist journey, slow tourism encompasses all the tourists' activities in the destination, by putting emphasis on sustainability and the tourist experience (Krešić & Gjurašić, 2022). Since there is not a unique definition of slow tourism, Calzani and de Salvo (2017) made a conceptual system which develops through three dimensions.

The first one, namely sustainability and environment, refers to the similarity of slow tourism to other tourism forms, such as ecotourism and responsible tourism (Timms & Conway, 2011). In fact, all these practices need to consider sustainability as their goal. As slow tourism reflects on consumption limitations (Savoja, 2011, in De Salvo et al., 2018), tourists are looking for quality over quantity, especially in terms of experiences. Therefore, among the environmental principle, slowness and experience are other elements able to conceive journey in a different way (Lumsdon & McGrath, 2010). Travelling from one place to another encompasses a certain level of impact on the journey and the environment as well. Hence, slow tourists will choose activities, destinations and form of transportations that can limit those impacts (Babou & Callot, 2009, in De Salvo et al., 2018). These people also devote their time to slowly explore the landscape and establish connections with local communities. Slow tourism is, therefore, defined as a tourist practice that allows people to experience the destinations differently by promoting authentic encounters (Nocifora, 2011, in De Salvo et al., 2018). Tourists choosing slower ways of travelling may cater the needs of modern tourists who feel overwhelmed by daily life, desire to slow down and reconnect with themselves and the environment around them. Therefore, tourism can contribute on enhancing peoples' wellbeing through the creation of spaces to temporary slow-down, bond with others and belong (Farkic and Taylor, 2019). There are two main motives for people to join in slow tourism activities (Oh et al., 2016; Lin, 2018, in Krešić & Gjurašić, 2022). Self-reflection and discovery are essential for travellers to recharge, create a deeper connection with their destination and reconstruct a positive mindset.

Therapeutic landscapes

It has been demonstrated that spending time in natural environments confers considerable benefits to health and wellbeing (Humberstone, 2015). Even the simple act of being immersed in green spaces has an influence on individuals' physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. The concept of nature is often associated with the idea of landscape. While the former generally refers to the non-

human created world, the latter encompasses the whole human experience, including both natural and cultural elements of space (Rathmann, 2021). Literature on health and place has identified those places that contribute to healing and wellbeing as therapeutic landscapes (Gesler, 2003). The same author described them as changing places, settings or situations that encompass physical, psychological and social environments associated with treatment and healing. Doughty (2023) further elaborates on the concept of therapeutic landscape underscoring their role in fostering experiences of relaxation, restoration and healing, thereby promoting a sense of wellbeing among individuals. Therefore, landscapes can be viewed and experienced as therapeutic due to their complex interaction with physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and environmental factors (Doughty, 2023). Furthermore, these experiences can nurture a person-place-health relationship, proving therapeutic landscape as places associated with wellbeing.

Therapeutic landscapes' concept has shifted from focusing on extraordinary places and short-term events to everyday activities and places that supports long-term wellbeing (English et al., 2008). In fact, they are not only concrete natural landscapes, but also different social construction of spaces and places (Rathmann, 2021). There are different kinds of environments, namely physical, social and symbolic, that may construct those landscapes. Exploring the therapeutic qualities of different settings can be done by focusing on the relationship between these three dimensions (Conradson, 2005). In relation to the physical environment, a therapeutic landscape usually involves green or blue spaces, such as forests, mountains, lakes or rivers. The presence of other people may also improve the potential benefit of a landscape. Fredrickson and Anderson (1999, p. 21) have suggested that establishing positive connections with other individuals within a wilderness environment could enhance an individual's perception of landscape's elements as potential source of spiritual inspiration. However, it is important to acknowledge that an individual's personal background may influence their inclination towards solitude or interaction with others. Finally, when the symbolic aspect is considered, therapeutic landscapes can be explored as places of meaning and experience, which goes beyond their specific locations (Taheri et al., 2021). Yet, landscapes are not only considered therapeutic for physical presence and engagement with a healthy environment, but also for the practices within which the body interacts with the place (Little, 2012). Rather than look merely at the therapeutic qualities of places, it is also important to investigate on individual's interaction with that landscape which may help to understand how the experience differs among people. In fact, Conradson (2005) claimed that health and wellbeing benefits are not inherent to the place itself but rather generate from an interaction that people have with the surrounding environment. Among this relations, particular attention has been given to those practices that involves an interaction with the surrounding landscape. According to a study (Duedahl et al., 2022), walking, especially in natural context, helps people to have positive experiences while also improve their health and wellbeing. Moreover, the same authors claimed that the healing benefits of nature primarily arise from the connection between walking, emotional attachment, and the natural environment, rather than nature intrinsic features.

Dimensions of walking

According to a study conducted by Enit and Touring Club (2024), Italy has emerged as the preferred destination in Europe for practicing slow tourism activities. At the regional level, Tuscany and Sicily have appeared as the leading destinations for Italians, French and Germans. The study focused specifically on hiking tourism by identifying routes and tracks across the country to assess the level of service quality provided. Hiking, portrayed as a slow adventure activity, involves walks in rural or mountainous areas for reasons related to nature, religion or health (ibid). It has been argued that this activity enables people to disengage from their daily routines and enhance their sensory awareness, allowing them to recall feelings and experiences that are part of their life (Anderson,

2004). Therefore, walking facilitates the alignment of mind, body and the surrounding environment by offering a deeper engagement with the place visited.

According to Rabbiosi (2021), walking can be seen as both a form of physical movement and a mode of performing places through diverse leisure activities, such as tourism. Indeed, various forms of transportation are perceived as *forms of material and sociable dwelling-in-motion* or even *places of and for various activities*, including specific types of conversations, work, information-gathering as well as maintaining a continuous presence with others (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p.214, italics added). The experience of walking involves a relationship between the moving subject and the place through a process of material organisation and landscape shape that involves symbolic and sensory perception of the embodied experience (Rabbiosi, 2021). Therefore, landscape becomes embodied when it is experienced through the physical process of walking, whereby an area is crossed, marked with the body and its effects are perceived physically. The process of moving across space, the use of senses and the reactions to tangible objects, social context and environmental conditions all contribute to the co-creation of landscapes (Augoyard, 2007; Doughty, 2013; Kärrholm et al., 2014).

Through both personal and shared understanding of self and place, individuals can cultivate a sense of identity and connection to their surroundings. This interaction can be achieved through embodied and conscious practices, such as walking, thereby producing external affective feelings and emotions (Humberstone, 2015). The body plays an important role in the experience and interaction with the environment through sensory perception. These sensory experiences can affect the individual at physical, mental and spiritual level, thereby constructing subjective perceptions of wellbeing (Fox et al., 2014). Indeed, walkers can evaluate and respond to both internal and external stimuli that initiate new human-environment interactions (Kärrholm et al., 2014). These triggers have the capacity to change the walking experience and the performance of walking itself. Consequently, walking fosters a holistic sense-making process, encompassing sensations felt, environmental awareness and embodied knowledge, thereby enabling individuals to interact with objects rather than simply contemplating them from a distance (Vergunst, 2008).

Senses and stillness

There is a substantial body of research in the tourism field dedicated to the exploration of the sensory aspect of tourist experiences. The process through which individuals perceive, experience and comprehend the landscape is complex. In fact, the act of perceiving the landscape often involves the collection of visual information about the landscape scenery (Antrop & Van Eetvelde, 2017). Information acquired through the visual senses facilitates the uncovering of memories, affections and facts derived from other senses, such as smell or hearing. Indeed, sensations, initiated by sensory organs, such as eyes, ears, nose, skin and tongue, are pivotal in shaping an individual's perception of the world, resulting in a conscious sensory experience (Goldstein, 2010, p. 8).

Tourists can experience the landscape through sensory and physical elements in their surroundings. Indeed, the term *experiencescape* is used to describe a tourism-related experience derived from external stimuli in the surrounding environment that also have an impact on the overall experience (Chen et al., 2020, p. 1409). According to Hull and Stewart (1995), landscape is experienced through three main elements. All the views, people and objects included in a landscape that one observes are components of an encountered landscape. The order in which these elements are experienced is referred to as the sequence, while the subjective elements experienced simultaneously across these viewpoints include feelings and thoughts. Therefore, it has been asserted that an individual's knowledge and culture influence the experience, making it subjective and unique (Antrop & Van Eetvelde, 2017). Even though external stimuli can influence the perception and experience of landscapes by providing subjective wellbeing (Carruthers & Hood, 2004), it is important to note that

travelling and experiencing different physical and cultural environments may only provide a sense of wellbeing in the short term. Therefore, understanding the impact of multi-sensory elements on the hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of wellbeing is crucial as sensations represent the primary motivator of tourist experiences (Agapito, 2023).

Engaging in activities, such as hiking, biking and surfing in rural regions, has been reported to elicit multisensory experiences, emphasizing sensations like the sound of silence, wind and sea touching (Agapito et al., 2014). Research indicates that sensory experiences significantly impact positive emotions in rural settings as well as tourists' attachment to destinations (Agapito, 2023). In contrast with urban areas, the countryside, with its natural features, provides a unique aesthetic tourist experience by fostering a multi-sensory appreciation of the surrounding environment and an engagement with nature (Agapito et al., 2014). When these sensorial elements attract individuals' attention by provoking subjective emotions, it is more likely that the experience will be memorable and meaningful and, eventually, last longer (Duerden et al., 2018). Other studies have pointed out that multi-sensory experiences can enhance eudaimonic aspects of consumption, such as sense of place and place attachment, in addition to hedonic aspects like emotional responses and satisfaction (Kastenholz et al., 2020; Yan & Halpenn, 2019). Sense of place as a concept, denotes the affective relationship that people create with their surrounding environment (Rathmann, 2021).

This emotional bond can be explored through the concept of stillness. Surrounded by cultural and spiritual references, the concept of stillness evokes the experiential qualities of the surrounding environment, including peacefulness and slow movement, which reflects individuals' inner world (Doughty, 2023). As both a practice and experience, stillness connects people to their 'sacred ground of being' (McGee, 2023) offering a moment of mindful presence and separation from daily thought, thereby providing rest, clarity and meaning. The longing for nature-based experiences, which was a central theme of Romanticism (Doughty, 2023), continues to resonate with the contemporary demand for restorative stillness. Consequently, conceptualising nature as a form of stillness may encourage daily interactions with green parks and rural walksapes, thereby highlighting natural environments' role in supporting wellbeing (Rousseau & Deschacht 2020). This phenomenon has been particularly evident during periods of crisis, such as the pandemic, which has also served to strengthen the relationship between nature and stillness.

Furthermore, the concept of stillness can also be related to silence, which has been defined as the 'absence of sounds' or 'the condition of being still and silent' (American Heritage Dictionary, n.d., silence entry). Spending time in silent surroundings offers the opportunity to relax, listen and hear clearly in a quiet, slow-paced environment (Komppula et al., 2017). One mode of experiencing stillness is through the immersion of the body into the surrounding environment, especially those with natural features (Doughty, 2023). The experience of stillness in natural environments has been shown to emphasise the therapeutic qualities of such settings by highlighting the auditory components of the experience (Gorman 2019, 10). Nevertheless, this experience remains inherently multisensory in nature, involving other senses, such as smell, touch and sight while facilitating movement within the landscape.

Conceptual framework

A review of the existing literature reveals an interrelation between slow movement, walking, therapeutic landscape, sensory impressions and stillness. These concepts together have constructed the following conceptual framework.

Slow movement was conceptualised as a living trend that encourages people to avoid rushing into everyday activities but rather slowing down and enjoy them without pressure (Farkic & Taylor, 2019). This concept has been employed to promote slow-paced tourism activities as well. In this context, tourism can be seen as an opportunity for creating a temporary space where individuals take time to reconnect with themselves and the world around them while also enhancing their wellbeing (ibid). Walking, as a deliberate and slow-paced activity, fosters the immersion in the surrounding environment, including natural sceneries (Anderson, 2004). Nature has been shown to provide therapeutic benefits for individuals' wellbeing. Consequently, those places that offer restorative qualities are designated as therapeutic landscapes (Gesler, 2003), which are typically experienced through movement and sensory engagement. Therefore, landscapes are therapeutic when there is an interaction between the body and the environment, which makes walking a unique way to experience a landscape differently.

Employing the senses not only facilitates the perception and experience of the environment in a subjective manner, but also enhances positive emotions, thereby promoting wellbeing. The concept of stillness emerges as an experiential quality of the environment that arises from mindfully engaging with the senses, including the act of listening to natural sounds, and observing the environment in detail (Doughty, 2023). The perception of stillness may vary among individuals in relation to the landscape encountered, environmental conditions and personal values. With its deliberate and slow pace, walking fosters a sense of stillness by offering an immersive experience of the therapeutic qualities of the environment (Gorman 2019, 10). Engaging in slower activities not only encourage positive emotions and wellbeing but also facilitate interactions between the body and the surrounding environment, thereby turning them into embodied practices. Consequently, individuals can reduce their pace and genuinely appreciate their surroundings through their senses by establishing a body-mind relationship. The experience of stillness enables individuals to fully perceive the therapeutic qualities of the surrounding environment by paying attention to sensory experiences while walking, thereby deepening the connection to therapeutic landscapes.

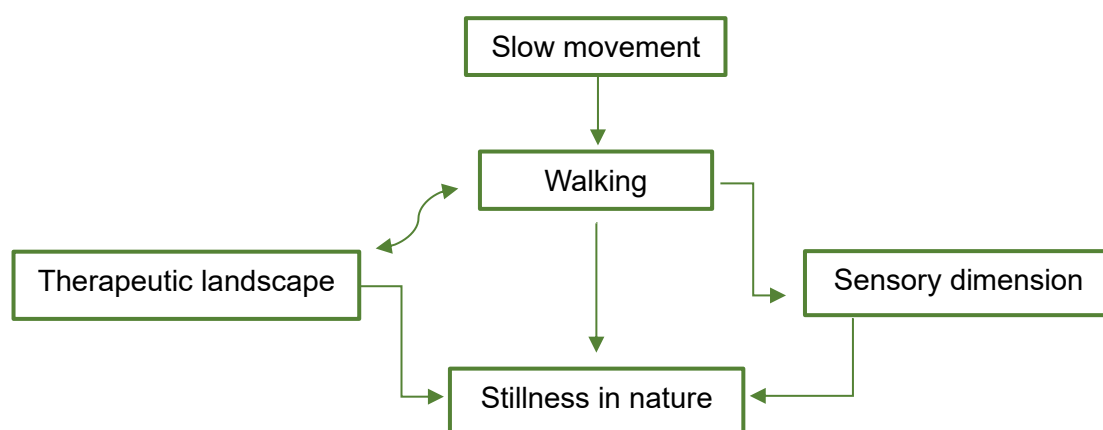


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework (Source: Author)

Purpose and research questions

As outlined in the conceptual framework, this research wants to further investigate the role of therapeutic landscapes and the senses in the context of a slow-paced and immersive activity, which is walking. Specifically, this paper aims to explore the walking experience of tourists travelling to the region of Tuscany, Italy, by focusing on natural trails within the province of Arezzo. Therefore, the study examines the multi-sensory aspect of these experiences, encompassing different sensations and emotions that arise from individuals' engagement with their surrounding landscape. The importance of sensory engagement in perceiving stillness in nature will be emphasised as well. Thus, the following paper will seek to address the following main research question:

How do multi-sensory elements of stillness affect walking as a tourist experience?

In order to provide a more comprehensive and detailed answer to the main RSQ, three distinct sub-questions have been outlined below.

1. Which kinds of emotional, physical and embodied sensations are evoked during the walking experience?
2. To what extent do tourists experience and perceive "stillness" while walking in nature?
3. What motivates tourists to seek out a walking experience in nature away from their home?

These questions have the shared purpose to understanding whether the experience of walking can provide benefits on tourists' wellbeing on the short- and/or long-term.

Chapter III: Methodology

This study aims to explore the immediate sensory experience and perceptions of restorativeness of tourists walking in the Italian countryside. To this end, qualitative methods of research have been adopted, including walking interviews, participant observation and field notes. The subsequent chapter will provide a comprehensive description of the study area, the methods of data collection and the analysis techniques employed. The chapter will also briefly address the role of the researcher, positioning it as an integral component of the overall research process.

Study context

This study was carried out in Italy, more specifically in the central region of Tuscany. In addition to being renowned for its food and wine culture, as well as its unique natural heritage, Italy is also characterised by an extensive network of hiking trails, most of which are under the stewardship of the Italian Alpine Club (CAI). The trails run through the whole peninsula, from the mountains and valleys to the coasts and plains, highlighting the biodiversity of the country. Due to the vast territory of the Tuscan region, the focus has been placed on the province of Arezzo. Within the province, the landscape ranges from plains and hilly valleys, typical of the Italian countryside, to forests. In fact, this area is best known for a large natural area, the Casentinesi Forests National Park, where tourists (international and domestic) go for hikes and walks in nature. For this study, several paths were selected in the following valleys: Valdichiana, Casentino, Valdarno and Valdelsa. These valleys are all close to Arezzo, therefore, providing a coherent and detailed picture of the nature experiences within the province. Accessibility played an important role in the selection, given the limited availability of public transport, especially at weekends. Given the heterogeneity of the region, it is therefore important to differentiate between the valleys and their potential to offer different nature experiences for the participants involved in this research.

Valdichiana is a valley characterised by a diverse landscape of plains, high reliefs and dense woodlands. Running alongside the Maestro della Chiana River, there is a dedicated pedestrian and cycling path, known as the Sentiero della Bonifica (n.d), which extends for over 60 kilometers through the rolling hills. This well-maintained route ensures a safe and ideal environment for those seeking to immerse themselves in nature, away from urban noises. Furthermore, the city of Arezzo offers a variety of scenic trails that traverse both hilly and flat terrains, providing a picturesque view of the city and the valley. The first self-organised excursion took place just outside the city centre, leading into a natural area all the way to the Poti Mountain range (974 meters above sea level). Although the ascent to the mountain's summit was not completed due to adverse weather conditions, the hike remained a rewarding experience, fostering interesting conversations and a deeper appreciation of the landscape.

Most of the hikes took place in the Casentino Valley, located between Florence and Arezzo. Encompassing over 5,000 hectares of forests, with thousands of centuries-old trees and sacred columns forming an immense natural cathedral, the Casentinesi Forests National Park is one of the most renowned forested areas in Europe. These enchanted woodlands offer trails that encourage meditative silence and a sense of immersion in nature. Within the park, two sites of significant cultural and spiritual relevance stand out, the Sanctuary of La Verna and the Hermitage of Camaldoli, both harmoniously integrated into the natural surroundings. A vast network of hiking and walking trails (approximately 600km of marked paths), connects these cultural landmarks with other areas within the park (Parco Nazionale Foreste Casentinesi, n.d). The one-day group excursion followed the trail from the town of La Verna to the Sanctuary, throughout a dense forest adorned with a colourful foliage. The park primarily attracts domestic visitors from neighbouring regions as well as the north

of Italy, though it also welcomes international tourists, particularly from Europe during the summer holidays. Each season unveils a distinct array of natural wonders, from the lush greenery of spring and lively summer events to the autumn foliage and the serene, snow-covered ridges of winter.

A self-organised excursion was conducted in the Valdarno Valley, which is crossed by the Arno River and situated between the cities of Arezzo and Florence. The landscape is characteristic of the Tuscan countryside, with seasonally shifting colours and pristine natural surroundings (Visit Valdarno, 2024). One of the most distinctive features of the area is the presence of steep cloggy slopes, known as Balze, which have been shaped over time by an ongoing erosive process caused by rainwater (Visit Tuscany, n.d). This geological phenomenon has resulted in a striking and picturesque landscape, attracting both domestic and international visitors annually. A designated circular walking path winds its way around these crags, promoting the area and its natural features. During the excursion along this trail, an engaging and insightful conversation emerged with a foreign couple.

Located to the north of Valdarno, near Siena, Elsa River Park or SentierElsa was selected as the final research site. This pathway offers a respite from the urban environment, allowing individuals to experience the sounds of nature and its tranquillity. Following the river in a linear route, this path offers opportunities for trekking, relaxation and even swimming during the summer months, while also allowing visitors to appreciate the natural beauty of the area (Pellegrini, 2021). Recently, the pathway has been recognised as a variant of the Via Francigena pilgrimage route, specifically as part of stage 32 between San Gimignano and Monteriggioni (Rafanelli, 2022). Unfortunately, due to severe weather conditions in the earlier weeks, the path has sustained significant damage, making navigation extremely challenging. However, the brief journey through SentierElsa led to a meaningful encounter with a couple who shared their personal insights on the experience.

Data collection

All self-organised excursions along with the group-guided excursion were planned in advance, taking accessibility factors into consideration. For the group-guided hike, a nature guide was contacted through the AIGAE, the Italian Association of Environmental Hiking Guides, which organises monthly excursions within the Casentinesi Forests National Park. In total, six one-day hiking excursions were performed across the four valleys mentioned earlier, with a specific focus on the Casentino valley due to its abundance of hiking and walking paths within its National Park. The data collection phase spanned from October 15th to November 3rd, 2024. Walking interviews were selected as the primary data collection method, as they enable the researcher to walk alongside one or more participants while interviewing them (King & Woodroffe, 2017). These interviews are designed to understand human experiences from the participants' perspective (Kusenbach, 2012). This methodological approach facilitates an exploration of the interaction between the physical, social and mental dimensions of place and space, thereby allowing the researcher to investigate participants' experiences, interpretations and practices within their environment (Carpiano, 2009).

The target population of this research consists primarily of domestic tourists, with international tourists comprising a smaller proportion. These individuals choose to travel to natural places within short or long distances from their place of residence for walking purposes. The field research involved participant observation, walking interviews and fieldnotes, conducted across four different valleys in Tuscany. This study aimed to gain insights into the multi-sensory dimension of nature walking, focusing on participants' sensation, perception and emotional responses while engaging with the surrounding environment. Exploring the sensory experience of walking in natural settings can provide valuable evidence on the concept of stillness in nature and human responses to it.

Participants were selected through convenience sampling to ensure a diverse range of viewpoints from each participant's experience. This method was used during the self-organised excursions by approaching people along the trails and asking their willingness to participate in a brief interview regarding their sensory experiences in nature. For the guided group excursion, the guide was approached before starting the hike to ask about the possibility of conducting interviews with the participants while walking. All of them showed a visible enthusiasm and curiosity regarding the research, with them expressing a desire to delve more deeply into the subject by posing additional questions along the path.

All the interviews were performed on a voluntary basis and recorded by using a digital device. Walking interviews were semi-structured to encourage a more spontaneous engagement with the interviewees, allowing the surrounding environment to inspire natural conversations (King & Woodroffe, 2017). The interview questions were divided into three separate themes (see Appendix 1): i. The immediate experience; ii. Motivations and long-term benefits; iii. The experience of silence and stillness. The first theme included some opening questions to initiate the conversation and make the participants comfortable, followed by general questions on their immediate experience in terms of feelings, preferences and meanings. After that more specific questions about sensory perception were asked, including sight, sound and embodied aspects. Participants were also asked to report any other sensory impressions that emerged during the experience. The second theme comprised questions about individuals' motivations to travel in nature for walking purposes, as well as potential long-term benefits that could be derived from the experience. The third theme explored the meanings, sensations and emotions that participants attached to nature's stillness properties, by referring to words such as peace, quiet and silence. Furthermore, participants were asked whether they frequently experience these feelings in their daily lives in order to assess the restorative potential of nature's stillness as experienced during a walk and/or a hike.

The open-ended nature of the questions was intended to stimulate conversation and provide further clarification when required. The average duration of the interviews was approximately 10 minutes, due to the nature of the excursions, which were primarily self-organised. Since the research participants were asked to participate in the study whilst walking, the time available for interviews was limited. As a result, each interview had to be adapted to suit the diverse circumstances encountered on the trails. During the fieldwork, participant observations were performed, with field notes and photographs taken, especially during self-organised excursions, in order to support the findings.

Data analysis

The total sample size comprised 22 participants from various age groups and places. The gender composition was perfectly balanced with 11 male and 11 female respondents. Most of the participants fell into the categories of middle-aged adults (40-59) and young adults (20-39), with only two respondents falling into the category of older adults (60+). Most of the interviews were conducted while walking, some while resting on the path, and the remaining interviews were conducted at the end of the walk. Interviewing people while walking was particularly challenging, and, sometimes, it was difficult to talk to people. Due to the low seasonality of the area where the fieldwork was carried out, most of the people were found around the Casentino valley, considering the most popular area in the province. An overview of the sample is given below.

Number of participants	22
Gender	
Male	11
Female	11
Age group	
Young adults (20-39)	8
Middle-age adults (40-59)	12
Older adults (60+)	2
Locations of walking interviews	
Valdichiana	4
Casentino	16
Valdarno	1
Valdelsa	1

Table 1. Research sample composition

Prior to data analysis, the recorded interviews were transcribed into text and all the fieldnotes were structured accordingly. The transcripts of the interviews were then analysed via open coding, whereby all the information related to a specific research area were grouped with an assigned code. These codes were then placed into different themes related to the interview guide's themes. During the transcription phase, potential patterns and themes were identified from the interviews in order to better understand the results found. Following the transcription phase, data were reviewed and subjected to initial codes. All portions of data with the same code were grouped together to identify possible central themes. This process was iterated through further arranging, re-reading and checking of the data, resulting in the identification of more stable themes to which specific titles were assigned to match the findings. Accordingly, four themes emerged, as outlined below. 1. Escapism and novelty: exploring the motivation of walking in nature; 2. The restorative effect of immersing in nature: finding stillness through the senses; 3. Human-nature connection through sensory and emotional experience; 4. Solitude and togetherness, a delicate balance between reflection and sharing. Within the findings section, several pictures, taken by both the participants and the researcher, have been included to add an illustrative dimension to the results.

Positionality

Besides the research design and its methods, the role of the researcher is a prominent factor within the present study. Researchers' identities and subject positions have been demonstrated to influence topics, questions, access, data interpretation and work dissemination, all of which affect the creation and sharing of knowledge (Van Ramshorst, 2024). The researchers' subjectivity has been conceptualised by Tribe (2006) as person, emphasising the influence of personal attributes, including gender, cultural background, socio-economic status and individual interests, on research design and outcomes. Indeed, the selection of the research topic was heavily influenced by personal interests in slow tourism forms, specifically on walking. The Tuscany region was selected as the primary research field due to an interest in the region's distinctive landscape which is predominantly rural with a presence of some wooded areas. Since I'm originally from a mountainous region, my interest lies in exploring a different environment while investigating the experience of walking through

sensory engagement, as inspired by my supervisor. In addition, being an Italian native speaker allowed me to easily establish a connection with most of my respondents, who shared the same cultural and social background. While this facilitated data collection, it posed a challenge during the data analysis phase as certain words and phrases lacked a direct translation in English. This resulted in a sense of uncertainty surrounding the interpretation of the findings and the potential misinterpretation of the participants' responses.

The employment of an interpretivist approach within the context of this qualitative study was a conscious decision made to facilitate comprehension of a social phenomenon, namely the experience of individuals whilst walking in nature. This approach acknowledges the multilayered dimensions inherent to the phenomenon and the necessity to interpret and make sense of people's actions and beliefs (Gorton, 2010). Both the geographical and academic positioning contributed to the validity of the research. My Italian cultural background facilitated clear and fluent conversations with participants, thereby avoiding the creation of a formal and rigid environment. Moreover, my academic position as a university student further encouraged participants, who expressed curiosity knowing that this research was being conducted in my home country, despite studying abroad. As a result, this heightened their interest in participating in the research. Furthermore, in this study I decided to incorporate my personal perspective, given that I was also embarking on a journey to experience nature with the senses. While this could be perceived as a form of bias, my intent was to provide additional evidence and support to the findings derived from the interviews.

Chapter IV: Findings

The findings of this study provide critical insights into both needs and sensory experience of walking in natural environment by addressing the research questions and uncovering patterns and trends within the data. Through the analysis of walking interviews, four key themes emerged, each shedding light on the impact of immersing in nature, in terms of sensations, feelings and motivations. A concluding paragraph offers the researcher's personal experience on the trail, providing another interesting viewpoint. This section structures the results by emphasising their relevance to the study's objective, thereby establishing a foundation for the following discussion and conclusion.

Escapism and novelty: exploring the motivation of walking in nature

When individuals are questioned about their motives for travelling to walk in natural settings, their responses often include a desire to escape from life stresses. Indeed, there is a strong tendency for people, particularly those whose job require long periods of sitting, to use natural trails as a means of disconnecting from daily life. In this regard, a young man described walking and being in natural settings as the contrary to everyday life. The natural environment can be interpreted as a counterbalance to the stress and rigidity of modern work life, thereby facilitating a detachment from daily life and obligations, and offering refuge in its therapeutic qualities.

Breaking away from routine in general, and then the fact that, for example, doing an office job, always being in front of a computer or dealing with stress—nature allows me to disconnect. So, I isolate myself from that world and come here because it's the opposite, in my opinion, and this regenerates me. (7)

(La rottura dalla routine in generale, poi il fatto che magari facendo un lavoro d'ufficio, stando sempre davanti ai computer o lo stress, con la natura riesco a staccare; quindi, ad isolarmi da quel mondo e vengo qua perché l'opposto, secondo me, e quindi mi fa rigenerare questa cosa.)

Similarly, another participant highlighted that walking and being in nature allows him to momentarily step away from the structured and predictable patterns of everyday life and briefly experience what it means to live free of musts. By immersing oneself in nature, perhaps in the wilderness or simply the outdoors, there is an opportunity to rediscover simplicity, freedom and a "wild state", which might refer to feeling more spontaneous and primal.

Stepping out of normality, out of routine, stepping out for a moment and doing something different [...] but also being in nature, getting away from the concrete, and living a bit in a wild state. (15)

(Uscire dalla normalità, dalla routine, uscire un attiminino e fare qualcosa di diverso [...] ma anche stare nella natura, uscire dal cemento e stare un po' allo stato brado.)

In this instance, a woman emphasised the need to slow down and regain balance from the hustle of daily routines. It is clear how nature might provide people with a space to appreciate life's simple joys that are often overlooked (see figure 2).

I chose to do this experience today because I needed to find a bit of balance and serenity, because daily life is a constant rush, I think for everyone, and we no longer pause to observe anything around us, the things that make us feel good. (8)

(Ho scelto di fare questa esperienza oggi perché avevo bisogno di trovare un po' di equilibrio e un po' un po' di serenità perché la vita di tutti i giorni penso un po' per tutti è tutto un correre e non ci soffermiamo più a osservare niente di quello che ci circonda, quello che ci fa stare bene.)

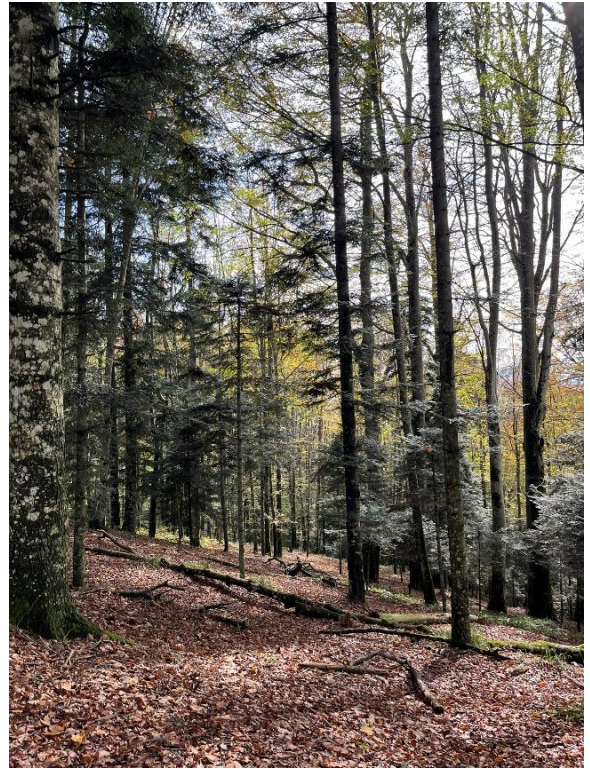


Figure 2. Casentinesi Forests National Park on the group hike (Source: Author)

The urge to explore unfamiliar natural landscapes and satisfy one's curiosity is another key motivation for engaging in natural walks. These insights suggest that such walks are driven not only by a desire to escape the familiar routine, but also by a yearning for discovery and novelty in the vast wonders of the natural world. One participant shared that the difference perceived from their normal surroundings sparked their interest in discovering new places (see figure 3). A similar preference was expressed by a couple, who cited forests as an example of a new environment, different from their home, that they enjoy experiencing while walking.



Figure 3. Balze del Valdarno - self-organised excursion (Source: Author)

I think it's like getting out of the city, and if we've heard of a place that's very beautiful or it's a nice hike ... we enjoy discovering new places, especially away from our usual context. (6)

To see other places, because we like new things, we like exploring environments different from our own. They're forests, but they are completely different. (21)

(Per vedere altri posti, perché ci piacciono le novità, ci piace girare ambienti diversi dai nostri. Son boschi, ma sono totalmente diversi.)

Furthermore, people claimed their insatiable desire not to return to familiar places but rather experience the vastness of nature in all its distinctive aspects. Consequently, they seek out new natural spaces that also offer them unique experiences.

The main motivation is just to see another piece of fantastic nature really. And, till now, we have managed not to go back to the same place, and I think we are not done yet, even within the space, so much to do. (22)

We usually look for places like this [forests] ... places where you can see different perspectives and natural glimpses, where you can walk and spend time outside. (19)
(Di solito cerchiamo posti così [...] posti naturali dove poter vedere differenti prospettive e scorci naturalistici, dove passeggiare, dove passare un po il tempo fuori ecco.)

The exploration of diverse natural spaces is characterised by an interest in encountering different perspectives and moments of beauty. In this regard, one of the participants was focusing on the biodiversity of nature, especially in Italy, by stating that even familiar landscapes can be experienced with a fresh view.

The love for nature and the curiosity about how nature can surprise you even in a similar environment ... the alpine context, which I know better, but also the Apennine and hilly landscapes. In Italy, you can just move to a different side to find something different, and it never stops to amaze me. So, even places we already know, I experience them differently every time. (3)

(L'amore per la natura e la curiosità per come la natura possa sorprenderti anche in un ambiente che sembra lo stesso ... quello alpino, che io conosco meglio, anche quello appenninico e collinare. In Italia ti basta spostarti di un versante per trovare cose diverse che non smettono mai di sorprendermi. Quindi anche posti che conosciamo già ogni volta li rivivo in maniera diversa.)

The main thing that stands out from the previous quotes is that people are searching for novelty, meaning they crave for experiences that differ from their everyday lives. Their need to seek for new experiences in nature arises from the sense of disconnection from reality that walking in nature provides. This perceived contrast between home and nature reappears in the interviews, particularly in terms of sensations. In one conversation with a foreign couple travelling from Sweden to Italy, emerged their perceived difference among their visual senses. In fact, they talked about how autumn in Italy was like summer in Sweden, referring to the colour of the leaves and trees all this as well as the temperature.

In October, in Sweden, it's pretty cold and also not so green. This for us is almost summer. (6)

Other people, on the other hand, dwell more on the ever-changing nature of the natural world. In one instance, a person observed how the same walk could feel different from time to time, in relation to the season, the sky or the weather (see figure 4). This reinforced the idea that nature is never static and that each time someone visits a certain natural place, it offers a unique perspective and sensory experience.

This walking trail seemed different compared to previous time [...] maybe it's the season, but also the sky. I think it's beautiful in a day like this because when it opens up you have a perception, five seconds later it covers and the wind starts to blow, and I think it's very interesting. (3)

(Lo stesso identico percorso mi è sembrato diverso questa volta [...] forse proprio la stagione, poi il cielo anche soltanto. Secondo me stupendo in una giornata come oggi perché, quando si apre hai una percezione, 5 secondi dopo si copre e esce fuori il vento, è interessante anche quello.)



Figure 4. View of Arezzo from the hills at two different times on the same daytrip (Source: Author)

While conversing with one of the first participant, the person was reflecting on how the physical characteristics of the natural environment can influence the experience positively. Specifically, the participant found the landscape he was walking through more enjoyable and soothing than the one he was already familiar with. This emerged in the context of sharing the experience with his young daughter. This consideration suggests that different terrains can evoke different emotions and sensations in the body.

These [trails/territories] are very soft and hilly, so gentle, and it's pleasant to walk here. Ours, instead, tend to be a bit steeper and rockier. (3)
(Questi [sentieri / territori] sono molto morbidi e collinari, quindi soft, è piacevole camminare. I nostri sono tendenzialmente un po' più impervi più rocciosi.)

Similarly, people recognised the inherent qualities of rural environments, including the quality of the air, as it provides both physical and mental respite from the polluted and confined environment of urban areas. Consequently, this underscored the restorative impact of nature, particularly for individuals with sedentary lifestyles.

I work in an office and I don't walk much; so, walking a bit and breathing this air, instead of the [polluted] air in the city ... you really feel much better, in my opinion. (16)
(Io sto in ufficio e non cammino tanto; quindi, camminare un po' e respirare quest'aria, invece che l'aria di città [inquinata] ... ci si sente proprio meglio secondo me.)

Walking in natural environments has been identified as an antidote to the stressful demands of daily life, thereby providing individuals with an opportunity to disconnect and recharge from the demands of their professional or domestic lives, but also to experience a range of emotions and sensations. Whether motivated by a desire to escape the rigour of office work, to seek novelty in unexplored landscapes, or simply to enjoy the fresh air and soothing surroundings, such experiences have been shown to stimulate a range of physical, mental and emotional benefits. The dynamic and ever-changing qualities of nature, in contrast to the more static urban environment, makes it an ideal refuge from stressful factors.

The restorative effect of immersing in nature: finding stillness through the senses

The initial phase of the interview process focused on understanding individuals' immediate experience while walking along nature trails. In essence, participants were invited to share their sensations and feelings that emerged from these experiences. A recurring theme among respondents involves how engaging in specific activities, such as walks or hikes in nature, provides an opportunity to disconnect from daily life demands, clear their minds and embrace the present moment. Consequently, this feeling occurred when participants were asked to define words, such as peace and tranquillity. Understanding their subjective interpretation and meaning is essential to comprehend the concept of stillness. Since most of the interviews were conducted in Italian, and this term doesn't have a direct translation, peace, tranquillity and silence were associated to stillness beforehand. Whenever someone referred to one of those terms, they were asked what it meant for them to feel that way within that space. Hence, participants associated peacefulness to a disconnection from daily life stresses and worries.

Peaceful means for me that you can just leave all your worries behind or your daily routines and that if you're quiet you can hear the birds and you can hear the water and that makes me feel ... it clears your head. (22)

Peace and tranquillity allow me to empty the mind, be calm and feel happy [...] appreciate what surrounds me daily. (17)

(La pace e la tranquillità mi permettono davvero di svuotare la mente, di essere serena [...] di apprezzare quello che mi circonda nella quotidianità.)

For me peace means clearing the mind a bit and trying to unplug, so I can enjoy what surrounds me. (13)

([Per me la pace significa] svuotare un po' la mente, riuscire un po' a staccarmi e così a godermi quello che ho intorno.)

In a conversation with a female participant, she referred to silence as the essence of peace. This concept pertains to the ability of an individual to exist in a tranquil and undisturbed environment, like the one found in nature. The term peace is often described as an internal state that fosters wellbeing and relaxation, distanced from the disruptive noises of the external world.

Peace, for me, means to feel good in your mind, relaxing without having all those external noises that cause discomfort ... peace means to enjoy the silence where you are. (20)

(Pace per me vuol dire stare bene con la tua mente, rilassarsi, non avendo magari tutti quei rumori esterni che ti provocano sempre disagio ... pace vuol dire godere del silenzio dove ci si trova.)

On the other hand, another female participants interestingly pointed out that being at peace is not just an internal state, but it is also tied to the sensory experience given by the surrounding environment. Whether it's the sound of leaves crunching, the smell in the air or the quiet setting, everything plays a role in shaping our perception of peace. This viewpoint shows the multisensory nature of experiencing stillness in nature by highlighting the interaction between different sensations, such as sight, sound and smell.

Everything that we perceive, smells, sounds, natural elements like trampling leaves, this silent background, everything contributes to that sensation [peace]. (8)

(Tutto ciò che percepiamo l'odore, i suoni, gli elementi della natura quindi dal rumore delle foglie calpestate [...] questo sottofondo sempre così di silenzio, tutto contribuisce a creare quella sensazione di pace.)

Thereby, individuals were asked to share their visual perception about the surrounding environment. Most respondents referred to terms, such as “peace” or “peaceful”, regarding what they were sensing by looking at the landscape. This sensation was often compared to a sense of calmness and mind clarity, which allowed people to get away from their daily routine (see figure 5). Additionally, the immersion in nature pointed out an overall sensation of stillness, especially at the level of the mind, given from describing the visual components as peaceful and quiet. This common sensation among participants comes from looking at natural elements, such as the colorful trees, due to the autumn season, and the light passing through the trees (see figure 6).

I would say it's very peaceful, it's giving you like your mind just calms down a bit [...] I really like looking out into like vast hills and landscapes like this. (6)

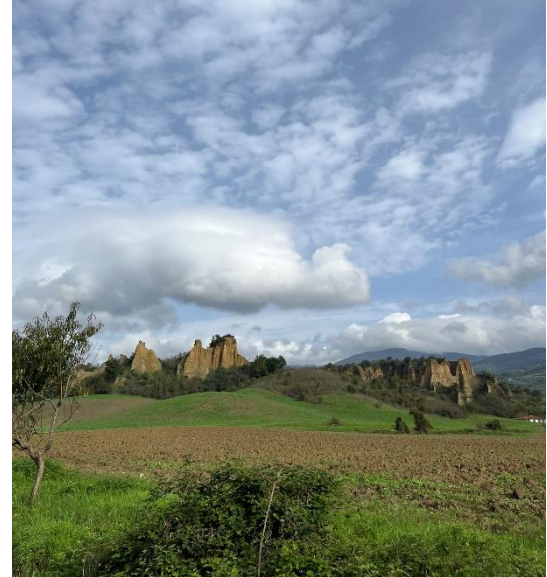
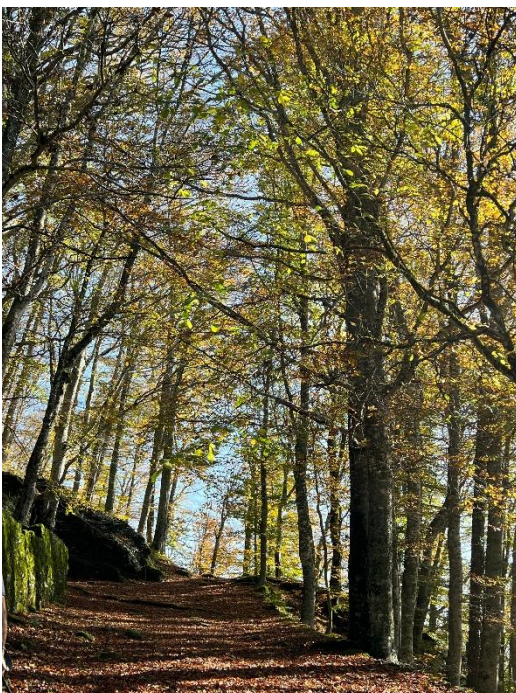


Figure 5. View of Balze del Valdarno - self-organised excursion (Source: Author)

I really like the light, the leaves and the colours of the trees, the nature and the landscape. Generally, it brings me a sense of peace, tranquillity and lightheartedness. (10)
(Mi piace molto la luce, anche le foglie e i colori degli alberi, della natura e il paesaggio. In generale mi mette una sensazione di pace e di tranquillità e di spensieratezza.)



As a sensation I would say it's peaceful [...] walking in the forest there is a beautiful silence and today is also a very sunny day. These glimpses [through the trees] gives me a quiet sensation [...] We do walks in forests in order to take a break from everyday life, from the city. (14)

(Sensazione ti dico una gran pace [...] Camminando nella foresta, dai, ehm, c'è un bellissimo silenzio e oggi poi è una bella giornata, in questo bel sole dai. Questi scorci mi danno una sensazione così, molto di quiete [...] facciamo le camminate nei boschi proprio per staccare dal quotidiano, dalla città.)

Figure 6. Glimpses among the trees, Casentinesi Forests National Park - group-guided excursion (Source: participant, 10)

I wanted to come here, among nature, because I don't do it quite often and every time I come here, I feel restored. Even just seeing the colours, hearing the silence and being in contact with nature, it makes me feel more peaceful, my thoughts calms down. (12)
(Avevo molta voglia di venire in mezzo alla natura perché non lo faccio da un po' di tempo e ogni volta che vengo qua, poi diciamo mi rigenera. Anche solo vedere i colori, sentire il silenzio e stare a contatto con la natura mi fa subito essere più serena, calmare un po' i pensieri.)

Similarly, participants were asked to share their thoughts and perceptions about the surrounding sounds. The majority of them, even here, mentioned a blissful and calming sensation coming from the birds singing and the trees moving from the wind.

The sound, that's also like soothing, I guess [...] I think it's partly very quiet, and then there's birds and the rustle of the trees, it's very nice. (6)

I'm feeling well while listening to the natural sounds, even the birds. They give me a feeling of inner peace. Here, I can finally stop thinking about everyday problems and focusing on the moment. (21)

(Si sta molto bene nel sentire quei suoni della natura, anche gli uccellini. Mi trasmettono una sensazione di pace interiore. Riesco a smettere di pensare ai problemi di tutti i giorni e concentrarmi solo sul momento.)

During the group excursion in the forest, I had a very inspiring conversation with a young female, who defined natural sounds, such as rustling leaves, birdsong and the wind, as gentle and inviting. Unlike the common comparison of silence to emptiness, nature provides a delicate atmosphere that feels welcoming and soothing, which can be also interpreted as silence (see figure 7).



The silence in the middle of nature is never truly silence because it's filled with the rustling of leaves, the sounds of animals, and the wind. It's a welcoming silence rather than a deaf or mute silence [...] Beyond the chatter we hear, the sounds are definitely gentler, like the crunch of leaves and birds singing, I perceive them as welcoming sounds. (12)

(Il silenzio in mezzo alla natura non è mai silenzio perché travolto dalle foglie, dagli animali, e dal vento quindi è un silenzio accogliente più un silenzio sordo e muto [...] Oltre le chiacchiere che sentiamo, sicuramente i suoni sono più delicati, cioè il pestare le foglie, gli uccellini, li sento come suoni accoglienti.)

Figure 7. The silent path around the Casentini Forests National Park - group-guided excursion
(Source: Author)

It is important to consider the possibility to hear external noise that can disrupt the experience of tranquillity for individuals walking in natural trails. In fact, during the interviews, participants were

asked whether other sounds, not inherently natural, could potentially interfere with their perception of stillness. Several responses noted that the presence of other people, particularly those conversing loudly, constituted a source of disturbance to their nature experience.

I remember that we were complaining because there were some ladies shouting at each other during the walk. I mean, they were talking, but I don't know, it was more like shouting [...] I think you should respect other people too, because you come to hear the nature [...] I think it destroys a little bit the enjoyment. (22)

Before you arrived, I heard that you were coming from the sound of leaves moving [...] in that moment I made a gesture as to say 'Oh no, other people are coming...' [...] Since there was no one, you come here in solitude for a while and hear walking steps and the thought of other people, bothers me somehow. (15)

(Prima quando eravamo noi due, si sentiva comunque che voi siete saliti dal rumore delle foglie [...] lì ti dico ho fatto proprio un gesto come dire 'No arrivando delle persone' [...] Dato che non c'è proprio nessuno, vieni qui in solitudine un pochettino e sentire il cammino e il pensiero di altre persone mi provoca un certo disturbo.)

Silence is a recurring element of the surrounding environment, which is perceived by participants through different kind of sensations, mostly sight and sound. People who walk on natural trails described silence as part of the background that gives them a peaceful and quiet sensation. Therefore, stillness emerged with a positive connotation given by the overall sensation of silence, peace and tranquillity coming from the natural environment and experienced by people during the walk. The participants' reflections highlight the profound and multisensory connection between walking in nature and achieving a sense of peace and stillness. Whether through visual or auditory sensations, nature provides an immersive experience that fosters calmness, clarity and disconnection from everyday stresses.

The human-nature connection through sensory and emotional experience

An interesting aspect about meeting and walking along people on the trails is the diversity and subjectivity of their sensory perception within the environment, with each natural encounter resulting in a unique experience. Nonetheless, a predominant sentiment of interconnectedness with nature emerged among respondents, manifesting as varied sensory experiences. Therefore, walking in natural settings has the potential to foster relationships between humans and the natural world. When asked to describe their immediate sensations, many respondents highlighted a sense of liberation and freedom, perceived both through their body and mind. Freedom is described as a feeling that derives from being in an open and expansive setting, as opposed to the closed and crowded environment of daily life. In one instance, the participant really captures the physical and emotional renewal sensation that comes from being in nature. The act of breathing deeply, in his case when arriving at the top of the hill, symbolise liberation and release.

I felt a sense of freedom, the lungs fill up with air, especially when you arrive at the top and see how the landscape is opening and it's so diverse, these beautiful autumn colours. (3)

(Io ho proprio sentito una sensazione di libertà, proprio i polmoni riempirsi d'aria, soprattutto quando arrivi un po' più in su e vedi questo paesaggio che si allarga ed è così variegato, questi colori stupendi dell'autunno.)

During the group excursion, a young female associated mountains, and its vastness, to a sense of freedom and perspective, which reminded her of how small people are comparing to life in general. Following the conversation, emerged that the sense of freedom she's experiencing is also bound to the senses. In fact, natural sounds might help us to step outside ourselves and feel part of a larger context, such as nature (see figure 8).

Every time I go to the mountains, I feel a sense of freedom and dimension because you understand how little we are in contrast with nature and also in relation to life. (10)
(Tutte le volte che vado in montagna sento un senso di libertà e di dimensione perché si capisce quanto si è piccoli rispetto alla natura e anche in riferimento alla vita.)

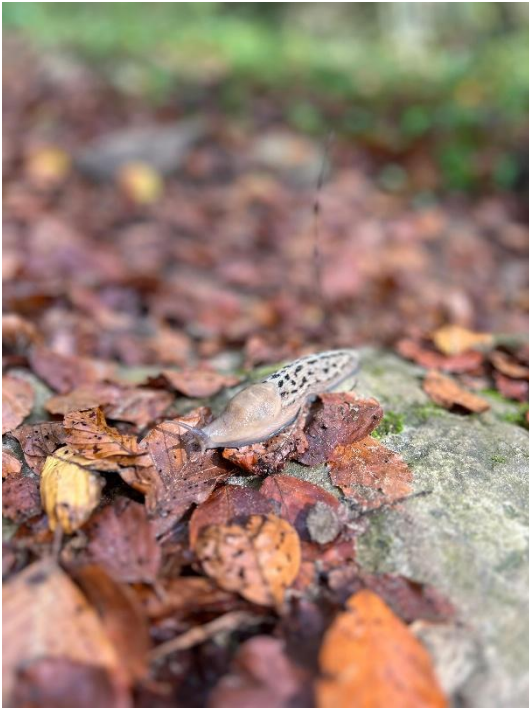


Figure 8. View from the top of Mount Penna - group-guided excursion
(Source: Author)

The sound of leaves that you step on, the birds, the branches moving: it is always related to the sense of freedom and feel in a bigger context like nature, in which we don't pay attention if we are not immersed in this landscape. (10)
(Il suono delle foglie che si pescano, degli uccellini, dei rami che si muovono; è sempre legato al senso di libertà e di sentirsi in un contesto grande come la natura che non ci si fa caso, se non si è concentrati o immersi in questo paesaggio.)

In a similar way, other individuals compared the experience of being in different natural settings, such as forest or the countryside, to an entirely different dimension, detached from the demands and necessities of daily life. Participants posited that the aspect of silence helps to further distance people from everyday life. Furthermore, emphasis was placed on the significance of being quiet in order to respect nature and the creatures living there, as they view the natural environment as “another world” (see figure 9).

We were in this place before, and we were in silence to listen to the natural sounds, and here I felt this sensation of being in another dimension, far away from everyday noises and I found it very relaxing. (19)
(Prima eravamo in un posto, ed eravamo in silenzio per ascoltare i rumori della natura, c'è proprio questa sensazione di trovarsi in un'altra dimensione, lontano dai rumori del quotidiano e questa cosa è davvero rilassante.)



When we walk, we hear the sound of flowing water ... the complete absence of civilization's noises makes it clear that we are truly in another dimension; in fact, I often say the forest is not our home, we are guests—it is the home of the animals; so we should also respect it by staying quiet, not making noise ... so it's truly another dimension, as if you're in another world. (17)

(Quando camminiamo sentiamo il rumore dell'acqua che scorre ... la totale assenza dei rumori della civiltà, fa capire che siamo effettivamente in un'altra dimensione; infatti, io dico spesso il bosco non è casa nostra, noi siamo ospiti, è la casa degli animali; quindi, dovremmo anche rispettarlo facendo silenzio non facendo rumore ... quindi è proprio un'altra dimensione, cioè sei in un altro mondo.)

Figure 9. Encounter with a snail - group-guided excursion
(Source: participant, 10)

The connection to nature experienced by participants further expands through the themes of belonging and memory. Walking through certain landscapes, such as forests and the countryside, evokes a sense of coming home, to those well-known places that carry with them a sense of familiarity. Furthermore, the imagery of having “feet as roots” serves to emphasise the grounding effect of nature, thereby fostering a sense of attachment and liberation (see figure 10). The human–nature bond is reinforced when individuals experience a sense of simplicity, arising from their connection with the earth.

These landscapes give the sensation of coming home, they resonate within, and you feel a bit like a return to zones that bring inner peace, so much so that your feet feel like roots. Even as you walk, these sensations of belonging to that place and at the same time of freedom. (4)

(Questi paesaggi danno la sensazione di ritorno a casa, risuonano dentro e quindi uno si sente proprio un po' come un ritorno in zone che danno quella pace interiore per cui quasi i piedi come radici, anche se uno cammina queste sensazioni di appartenenza a quel luogo e allo stesso tempo di libertà.)



Figure 10. Imaginary of feet as roots, Casentinesi Forests National Park - group-guided excursion (Source: participant, 10)

Since we are all part of this environment, we are all aware that we come from the earth; therefore, I feel more natural and simpler, more attached to the earth. (19)

(Dal momento che facciamo parte tutti di questo ambiente, siamo tutti consapevoli che veniamo dalla terra; perciò, mi sento più naturale e semplice, più attaccato alla terra.)

On the other hand, participants recalled emotional responses, including memory and nostalgia, given by the sensory experience of smelling. The scent of earth and leaves is compared to a feeling of nostalgia, potentially reflecting on the past or a longing for a simpler time (see figure 11). In contrast, the second quotation suggests that nostalgia is not only personal, but also collective, since the participant is imagining others who have travelled the same space in the past.



The smell of earth, the smell of leaves, and the scents, I notice that it brings me a sense of memories and a bit of melancholy. (10)

(L'odore della terra, l'odore delle foglie e gli odori che si sentono mi trasmettono un senso di ricordi e un po' di malinconia.)

The wet foliage and the steps [make me feel] nostalgic, perhaps concerning those who have passed through these paths, those who have walked through this forest. (12)

(Il fogliame bagnato e i passi [mi fanno provare] la nostalgia, forse riguardante a chi per queste strade ci è passato, a chi per questo bosco ci ha camminato.)

Figure 11. Path of leaves - group-guided excursion
(Source: Author)

The human-nature bond is deepened even further through the connection between walking and mindfulness. Being mindful in nature means to practice awareness, allowing people to experience the present moment with greater simplicity and authenticity. A male participant, while walking with his daughter, emphasized the role of sensory engagement during their walking experience. Thus, by closing their eyes and focusing on the sounds and physical sensation of footsteps on the path, people can interact with their surroundings not solely by the visual sense, but also through the other senses.

We closed our eyes [...] and I told her, 'focus also on the sensation, place your feet where the tractors and cars pass, where it feels soft. You don't need to look, you could go on for a kilometer, even if the path winds, if you let your feet and hearing guide you.' (3)

(Abbiamo proprio chiuso gli occhi [...] e gli ho detto 'concentrati anche sulla sensazione, metti i piedi dove passano i trattori e le macchine dove senti morbido, non hai bisogno di guardare potresti andare avanti anche per un chilometro, anche se il sentiero serpeggia, se ti lasci guidare dai piedi e dall'udito'.)

Walking mindfully in nature also helps people to clear their heads, allowing thoughts to flow freely rather than becoming overwhelming. As a result, people feel more natural and simpler, which enables them to only think about what really matters as well as the necessity during a walking trip.

For me, walking is a meditation, also because of the rhythm of the steps; so, I manage to clear my thoughts, instead of letting them pile up in my mind. (18)

(Per me camminare è una meditazione, anche perché c'è il ritmo del passo; quindi, riesco a eliminare un po' di pensieri, anziché farle accollare nella mente.)

I feel much more natural, I think about much simpler things compared to work, money, and these things. I think about which road to take, how much food and water I have. I feel much more natural, on a personal level, simpler. You only think about what really matters and then relax and breathe the fresh air. (16)

(Mi sento molto più naturale, penso a cose molto più semplici rispetto che al lavoro, soldi e a queste cose, penso a che strada devo fare, a quanto cibo e quanta acqua ho, mi sento molto più naturale, come dire, a livello proprio personale, più semplice. Pensi solo alle cose che veramente contano e poi il resto a rilassarti e respirare l'aria fresca.)

Paying attention to natural sounds without cognitive effort enables individuals to attain a meditative state. One participant posited that the soundscape experienced in nature have a cleansing effect on the mind. The notion of “not needing to think” connotes a state of mental liberation, where the mind is relieved from the stresses of normal routine.

The brain seems to do a purifying action in these wonderful [natural] sounds which you can't always hear and/or perceive during everyday life. You don't need to think about anything, especially not matters of work and duties. (4)

(Il cervello sembra fare un'azione di detox in questi suoni che sono meravigliosi, e che non riesci a percepire sempre durante la vita di tutti i giorni. Senti proprio anche che uno non pensa delle cose non si arrovella il cervello, ma anche semplicemente questione di lavoro e incombenze.)

All the experiences shared by participants highlight the complex relationship between humans and nature, facilitated by emotional connections, sensory perception and mindfulness. Walking in natural setting not only fosters a sense of freedom, but also awareness of the present moment. Through different sensory experiences, including vision, hearing, olfactory and touching, individuals can reconnect with the natural world and experience a sense of being grounded to the earth. Moreover, natural encounters have been shown to evoke feelings of belonging and nostalgia, thereby reinforcing the human-nature connection.

Solitude and togetherness, a delicate balance between reflection and sharing

The experience of walking in nature varies significantly between individuals. On the field, I had the opportunity to observe and engage with different people about their subjective experience of walking in natural environments. It became evident that there was a diversity of needs and preferences, particularly regarding the choice between walking alone or in a group. From the interviews emerged that individuals often seek a balance between interacting with others and being in solitude. Both options can encourage reflection and, at the same time, the opportunity to share the experience with others. During one conversation with a young man, he expressed a preference for walking in small groups, referring to it as an opportunity to be more open and share personal thoughts and stories along the way (see figure 12).

With just few people, and if you know them very well, the discussed topics are completely different, and this transforms the walk into an opportunity to share stories. Because you might spend an hour or so, instead of always thinking about daily life, your work, and all your problems, simply sharing if something's bothering you, expressing it, making very personal comments. (15)

(In poche persone, e se le conosci molto bene, anche gli argomenti sostenuti sono completamente diversi e questo fa sì che la camminata si trasforma nell'esperienza anche di raccontarsi. Perché magari passi un po' di tempo, un'oretta, invece di pensare sempre alla quotidianità, quindi al tuo lavoro e tutti i tuoi problemi, ma semplicemente ti racconti se c'è qualcosa che non ti va la esprimi personale, commenti molto personali.)

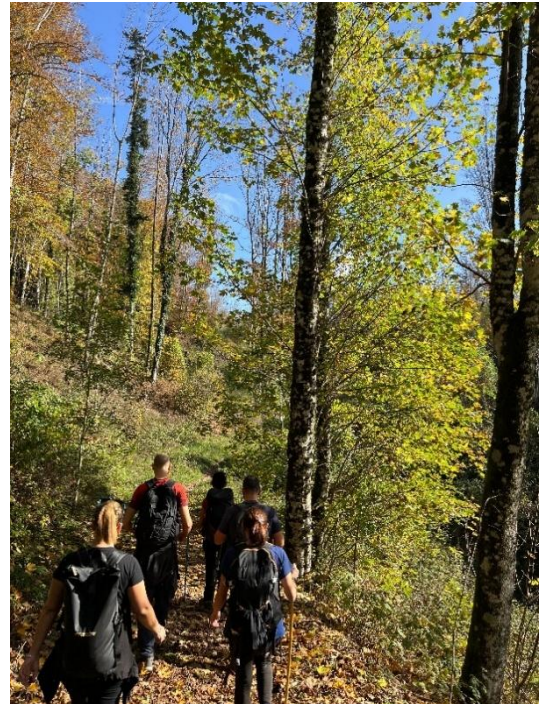


Figure 12. Group-guided excursion in the Casentino Valley
(Source: Author)

During the group excursion, one of the conversations revealed the importance of balancing time spent alone and with other people. The participant disclosed a preference for walking alone, particularly during multi-day trips, referring to the constant interaction with others as a key factor. This preference was attributed to the ability to engage in self-reflective thoughts and contemplate the surroundings, which is facilitated by walking in solitude (see figure 13).

In a group there's this shared experience, even on the small difficulties of the walk. When you walk for several days, you need to carefully choose the people you're with because you need the right balance of solitude and company. Perhaps during the walk itself, it's better to be a bit more separated, especially if you already shared food, sleeping, etc., so there's always the risk of an overdose of company. Instead, while walking, you have the chance to reflect, think, look around and be with yourself. (11)

(In gruppo perché si crea questa condivisione magari dei piccoli disagi del cammino. Per quanto riguarda i cammini di più giorni, bisogna scegliere accuratamente le persone con cui parli perché comunque ci vuole il giusto mix di solitudine e di compagnia. Magari proprio il cammino in quanto camminare forse è meglio stare un po' più separati, anche perché poi condividi cibo dormire etc quindi c'è sempre il rischio di andare in overdose di compagnia. Invece quando cammini hai modo di riflettere, di pensare, di guardarti attorno e di stare con te stesso).



Figure 13. Walking alone - self-organised excursion in the Casentino Valley
(Source: Author)

Another perspective is given by a couple who stated how walking enables people to engage in conversations and discuss about what they observed during the experience, emphasising the role of walks to facilitate experience sharing with others. However, they also noted that walking not only represent an opportunity to share with one another, but also to reflect. Indeed, reflection can be seen as a form of introspective dialogue, aimed at understanding the observations and emotions experienced in the moment.

We want to find ourselves because when you are walking you can discuss [about what you feel and sense in the moment], talk and observe [...] I can add, from personal experience, while walking I think you're able to open up more with the person you're with [...] observing leads you to reflect, but also walking. (19)

(Noi cerchiamo a grandi linee noi stessi perché comunque passeggiando si discute, si parla e si osserva [...] posso aggiungere, come esperienza personale, mentre cammini, secondo me, riesci ad aprirti di più con la persona con cui sei [...] l'osservazione ti porta comunque a riflettere, l'osservazione, ma anche il cammino.)

In response to inquiries regarding the value of silence in nature, respondents frequently highlighted its capacity to facilitate reflection compared to daily life situations. Due to the presence of more pleasurable stimuli, such as natural sounds, participants can easily experience stillness in nature, thereby allowing individuals to have more head space for personal and profound thoughts. Consequently, walking is regarded as a means of escaping the excessive stimuli which characterised normal routine.

It's a moment in which I reflect; today, since we're in a group, maybe a bit less, but usually I do trek alone. It's also a moment to give space to thoughts that aren't about daily life. So, deeper reflections, you know [...] Every day, you might be distracted by so many things, even notifications, the noises you hear at home, even traffic sometimes, even though you might be used to it. But here, no, it's a completely different context; it's different. (7)

(È un momento in cui rifletto, oggi che siamo in gruppo forse un po' meno, però di solito faccio trekking da solo, è un momento anche magari per dare spazio più ai pensieri non

di tutti i giorni. Quindi riflessioni più profonde ecco [...] Tutti i giorni magari sei distratto da tante cose, anche dalle notifiche dai rumori che senti in casa banalmente anche il traffico magari a volte, nonostante uno possa essere abituato. Mentre qua invece no, è tutto un altro contesto, è diverso.)

It's a way of reflecting, isn't it? Of finding concentration, but above all of reflection, given that we are always, let's say, subjected to so many stimuli. It lets you focus a bit more on yourself. (14)

(È un modo di riflessione no? Di trovare concentrazione, ma soprattutto di riflessione visto che siamo sempre, comunque come dire sottoposti a tanti stimoli, ci si concentra un po' più su sé stessi.)

The fact that there are very few stimuli, except for the sound of leaves, birds, the fact that there are very few people, no traffic, no internet. You really have to lower your level of attention. (16)

(Il fatto che ci sono pochissimi stimoli, se non il rumore delle foglie, degli uccellini, il fatto che c'è poca gente poche persone e non c'è traffico, non c'è internet. Devi proprio abbassare il livello di attenzione.)

Among the respondents, it was also highlighted that constantly sharing the space with many people may become overwhelming over time. One person shared that he finds the city environment to be draining due to its crowded nature, giving less room for reflection. Therefore, being outdoors gives the opportunity to reclaim one's space by offering a sense of spaciousness and exclusivity (see figure 14).



When you are in the city, you feel that you are sharing the space with a lot of people and it is fine, but at some point, it becomes stressful for me. And when I'm outdoor I feel like the space is all for me and this is very relaxing. (1)

(Quando si è in città si sente che si sta condividendo lo spazio con tante persone e va bene, però a un certo punto credo che a me cominci a stressare un po' e quando sono all'aperto sento che è come se lo spazio fosse tutto per me e questo è molto rilassante.)

Figure 14. Nature facilitates reflection - self-organised excursion
(Source: Author)

On the other hand, another respondent mentioned how walking in nature represents a moment of solitude, a space where people can reflect on personal matters without getting distracted. Hence, natural walks are seen as a space to reconnect with oneself on deeper level.

It is my moment to think about my things, to find even there a bit of space for myself. (13)
(è un momento mio anche per pensare alle mie cose, per trovare anche lì un po' il mio spazio.)

What people experience during their walks in nature is deeply personal. For some people, walking represents a chance to connect with others, share thoughts and create meaningful conversations, while for others, it serves as a much-needed retreat into solitude for self-reflection and inner dialogue. Sometimes this need for alone time to self-reflect is enhanced by the perception of silence in nature. In general, people often seek a balance between solitude and companionship as both provide unique opportunities for personal growth and connection. Therefore, walking fosters an escape from the overstimulation of daily life, offering a serene environment for deeper reflection and the simple pleasure of observing the natural world.

To summarize, the findings of this study identified four key points, which will be discussed in the following chapter. Nature walks provide an opportunity to escape the familiar and seek for new experiences in natural environment, thereby emphasising the contrast between urban and natural environments. This distinction is further motivated by the restorative benefits that nature provides, also in relation to the senses. Furthermore, it was found that the experience of stillness and silence in natural environments is enhanced by engaging with multiple senses, particularly sight, sound and smell. Those sensory experiences fosters a strong sense of connection with the surrounding environment, accompanied by feelings of belonging, grounding and mindfulness. Moreover, the multifaceted nature of the walking experience in natural settings promotes both meaningful social interaction and moments of solitude, and self-reflection, thereby facilitating dialogue and connection with others and the self.

The researcher's experience

The previous findings are supported by the researcher's experience, which was reported mostly during the self-organised excursions. This section will provide further validation on the importance of multi-sensory awareness and engagement with the surrounding environment during a walk.

On the initial walking trail, I immediately noticed some differences in perceiving the natural environment. The coloured leaves and the natural sounds in the background were perceived as peaceful. These sensory impressions were associated with a sense of wholeness and perspective given by the expansive view of the countryside that unfolded in front of me. This peaceful and soothing sensation was experienced again during another walking trail among the countryside, when listening to birds singing and the wind in the trees. Similar feelings were elicited when observing the sun's rays filtering through the trees and sensing the warmth on the skin. These innate experiences initiated by a range of human senses, such as sight, hear and touch, collectively facilitated the perception of nature as a serene environment, thereby emphasizing its restorative qualities.

Furthermore, a sense of belonging was experienced while crossing a forest. Indeed, during a specific moment of the walk a sense of closeness to home was perceived. This occurred whilst looking down at my feet, observing the colourful leaves and listening to the sound of them crunching beneath, along with the smell of trees. This sensory experience was characterised by a sense of familiarity, evoking recollections of formerly experienced paths. During one of the hikes in the Casentino Valley, while crossing a body of water, I could perceive different sensory impressions beyond the simple act of hearing the water flowing. In fact, I could smell and sense the freshness of the air on my skin due to the wind and humidity. The experience of walking between diverse environments, in this case forests and the countryside, made me realise how different the experience could be. While forest settings have been showed to facilitate varied sensory experiences, including visual, auditory, olfactory and tactile, the countryside primarily evokes positive emotions of peacefulness and tranquillity, fostered by the open landscape. Consequently, empirical research conducted in these environments has encouraged a unique experience of nature, one that stimulates a sense of mindfulness and engagement with the surrounding environment by embracing its elements.

Chapter V: Discussion

The restorative power of being in nature

The present study reveals that a strong motivational component, namely escaping from daily life, is embedded in the restorative and therapeutic properties of nature, which can be found through embodied immersion. Regarding the motives for seeking and engaging in walking experiences, several aspects can be outlined. Firstly, a desire to escape from the stressful and rigid daily routine was commonly shared among respondents. Placed under slow adventure tourist activities, walking in nature offers an opportunity to slow down, embrace simplicity and gain mental clarity, particularly when done mindfully. As a result, people perceive nature as restorative, as it allows them to disconnect from reality and seek refuge in its therapeutic qualities. The numerous benefits associated with walking in nature may, therefore, encourage individuals to travel in order to experience this, thereby, transforming it into a tourist activity.

Various explanatory models have been used to provide evidence for the restorative effects of nature on people. According to the present study, nature provides a momentary break from daily stress, leading to rejuvenation. Both Stress Recovery Theory (SRT) and Attention Restoration Theory (ART) support the idea that exposure to natural environments can reduce psychological stress and mental fatigue, as nature offers more restorative properties compared to urban environments (Berto, 2014). While urban settings require people's direct attention, potentially leading to mental overload, natural environments offer a sense of ease and fascination, facilitating recovery and restoration. Indeed, nature provides a variety of stimuli, such as the colour of the trees, the sound of leaves and birdsong, which allow participants to feel restored by looking and listening to these natural features. Attention Restoration Theory highlights the importance of *fascination* as a quality of the environment that enhances the overall restorative experience (Kaplan, 1995, p.172, italics added). Gentle and soft elements in nature not only reduce the level of attention, but also make space for reflection, which has also been mentioned in previous studies (Herzog, 1997). Compared to natural settings, people found ordinary places in everyday life to be draining and too crowded, resulting in less opportunity for resting attention and space for personal reflection.

Travelling to experience nature nurtures the idea of being away from home, thus offering a sense of detachment from everyday life through the immersion in different environments. Similarly, the ART theory highlighted the importance of *being away* as a crucial factor in alleviating daily stress (Kaplan, 1995, p.173, in Ohly et al., 2016, italics added). Furthermore, findings from the present study suggested that merely observing the visual components of natural environment can evoke a sense of freedom and perspective, given by individuals' experience of an open and far-reaching view. In line with this, ART referred to the criterion of *extent* as the perception of vastness in landscapes, which contributes to therapeutic benefits (Kaplan, 1995; p.173, in Ohly et al., 2016, italics added). However, these theories predominantly focus on visual stimuli when considering the restorative properties of nature. In contrast, the present study highlights other sensory experiences beyond vision, particularly soundscapes, which play a crucial role in fostering renewal and psychological restoration.

Participants reported positive emotional responses when listening to the birds singing, the movement of the trees and the wind. In fact, these auditory stimuli facilitated a sense of escape from the hustle of everyday life. This aligns with findings from a study conducted in England, which demonstrated that people linked nature sounds, including birdsongs and wind, with restorative experiences, such as pleasure, relaxation and escape (Ratcliffe et al., 2013). Compared to external noises from the urban environment, natural sounds were highlighted for their beneficial power to clear people's minds

from stressful thoughts by letting them flow freely. A study by Alvarsson et al. (2010) found that natural sounds were perceived as more enjoyable than urban sounds, leading to a faster stress recovery. Similarly, participants in the present study draw attention to the physical and psychological relief associated with inhaling fresh and clean air in natural settings, compared to the polluted air of cities. These findings are consistent with previous research documenting the restorative effects of air quality on well-being (Franco et al., 2017).

The effect of nature's visual properties on restoration has been empirically validated to a greater extent than the impact of other senses, which are frequently overlooked or only examined in isolated experiments, such as quantitative research. Nevertheless, there has been a growing attention on sensory experiences in qualitative studies by applying the therapeutic landscape's framework (Bell et al., 2022), which emphasises the role of senses in therapeutic engagement. Consequently, the present study contributes to the existing research by emphasising that engaging with multiple senses can enhance the perception of nature as restorative.

Mindful engagement and connection with nature using multiple senses

Walking in nature evokes embodied, physical and emotional sensations that lead to a deep connection with the environment. This immersive experience is facilitated by movement and sensory engagement, which draws the individual deeper into the natural world. The employment of the senses while walking in nature allows individuals to perceive and experience their surroundings in a unique way, while also enhancing positive emotions. Within the results of the present study, several sensory themes emerged in relation to the human senses, including sight, sound, smell and, sporadically, touch. In general, individuals tend to be unaware of their surroundings unless they encounter prominent aspects, whether positive or negative, of the environment (Gifford, 2011). However, engagement with the environment can be significantly enhanced when individuals receive specific prompts or are encouraged to reflect on their sensory experiences in nature. This is consistent with findings from a study in which simple instructions directed participants' attention to their experiences in nature, fostering awareness of the present moment (Nisbet et al, 2019). As individuals develop greater awareness of their surroundings, they may also experience mindfulness in nature.

The present study emphasised the importance of senses during nature walks, focusing on incorporating other senses beyond vision. By actively engaging multiple senses, participants reported to feel more present both physically and mentally, highlighting the role of mindfulness in fostering a deeper connection with nature. Notably, few participants were observed taking photographs of various natural encounters along the trails, such as wildlife, expansive landscapes or distinctive trees. Those findings align with prior research in which participants were asked to send photos from their walks (Doughty et al., 2022). This emphasised the significance of noticing subtle details and elements in nature, such as flowers or insects, to enhance environmental awareness and stimulate curiosity. In contrast to other studies that instructed participants to document natural elements that elicited positive sensations (Passmore and Holder, 2016), the present study revealed that individuals spontaneously paused their walks to engage with the natural surroundings. This deliberate approach underscores the importance of intentional engagement with the natural world in fostering moments of presence and mindfulness among participants, thereby allowing them to slow down.

Respondents along the trails frequently identified visual elements, such as open landscapes, the colours of tree and leaves, and sky as their most prominent sensory impressions. These natural encounters elicited physical and emotional sensations of renewal, arising from the perceived difference in experiencing nature compared to their hometown. Indeed, the dynamic and ever-

changing nature of landscapes was emphasised to illustrate how seasonal variations shape the experience of being in nature. Previous research has highlighted that people appreciate the seasonal change of colours as a reminder of renewal (Duff, 2012). In line with this, several studies have stressed the importance of visual elements, particularly the colours of leaves and trees, in fostering sensations of elevation and psychological absorption (Lengen, 2015; Thomas, 2015; McNamara et al., 2020, in Bell et al., 2022). The present study further revealed that the sensation of freedom and liberation experienced in nature is not exclusively attributed to visual stimuli but also deeply influenced by the soundscape. The sounds of leaves crunching underfoot, birds singing and the rustling of branches in the wind contribute to a heightened sense of immersion in the natural environment, reinforcing the multi-sensory dimension of the experience.

The significance of tactile sensations in human-nature interactions has often been overlooked (Franco et al., 2017). However, physical immersion in nature through touch can foster a sense of attachment and grounding to the earth. Participants in the present study reported an embodied sensation of “feet as roots” while walking on a leaf-covered ground. This finding aligns with the work of Mayer et al. (2009), which suggests that such embodied experiences enhance individuals’ sense of belonging to a broader context, reinforcing their connection to the larger natural community. In the present study, participants were encouraged to actively engage with their surroundings through multiple senses, which, in turn, reinforced their sense of nature connectedness. This is consistent with a cross-sectional study by Lumber et al. (2017), which demonstrated that individuals’ sense of connection to nature can be amplified when engaging with sensory and emotional patterns. However, the same author claimed that the mere participation in nature walks was not sufficient to enhance nature connectedness, rather, a meaningful engagement through sensory perception, emotional responses and personal interpretation could play a substantial role in consolidating that bond (Lumber et al., 2017).

Additionally, another sensory-informed theme that emerged from the present study was olfactory perception. Participants frequently associated the scent of earth and wet foliage with feelings of nostalgia and a longing for a simpler time. This finding is supported by other research revealing the nostalgic influence of scents in imprinting both joyful and distressing experiences into memory (Gorman, 2017). More specifically, some respondents linked these natural scents to childhood memories of walking in nature and engaging in outdoor activities during their youth. Similarly, a scholar has described how the scent of a particular tree can evoke recollections of happy childhood experiences (Thomas, 2015).

The role of silence and stillness in nature

Immersing in natural environments encompasses the experience of stillness as both an emotional and conscious state, shaping an individual’s bodily awareness within the landscape. In the context of this study, terms such as “peace”, “quiet”, “tranquillity” and “silence” emerged among participants’ responses, reflecting an overall perception of stillness in nature. Kaaristo (2014) conceptualised the notion of the *rural idyll* (p.272, italics added) as a soothing and calming environment, often characterised by natural sounds such as birdsong and the wind (Woods, 2011, p.111, in Kaaristo, 2014). The present study sought to investigate the ability of individuals to perceive and experience stillness during a walk in nature. Hence, the findings show that most participants associated sounds and silence in nature with stillness, frequently describing their experiences by using words like “peace” and “tranquillity”. This perception was attributed to the quiet and tranquil environment of nature in contrast to the noisy urban environment. These results align with Weeden (2011), who found that proximity to nature fosters a sense of *inner peace* and renewal, as nature offers an escape from the demands and routines of daily life (Kaaristo, 2014, p.271, italics added). Furthermore, the

perception of stillness in nature arises through the engagement of multiple senses. In the present study, participants asserted that their experience of nature as peaceful was enhanced by interacting with the landscape through visual, auditory and olfactory stimuli. Notably, the role of a silent soundscape was emphasised, underscoring the significance of sound in generating sensations of stillness. Supporting this, Komppula and Kono (2012) demonstrated that experiencing nature through multiple senses, while attuning to its silent background, can provide a restorative experience, particularly for individuals accustomed to chaotic urban environments. Such restorative experiences may be interpreted as a form of stillness in nature, an aspect that is often absent from everyday urban settings.

Furthermore, participants in the present study perceived a distinct difference between natural and urban environments, expressing a preference for rural settings, such as forests and the countryside, which were often characterised by a calmer and more soothing experience. Various studies have demonstrated that visitors value the absence of urban noise in rural landscapes, as it allows them to experience silence and stillness (Agapito et al., 2014; Carneiro et al., 2015; Kastenholz et al., 2012, in Kastenholz et al., 2020). Silence in nature is often described not as an absence of sound but as the presence of specific natural auditory elements, including the rustling of leaves, the sounds of animals and the movement of the wind. These sensory impressions were perceived by participants as gentle and inviting, rather than mute. In alignment with previous research, individuals often make comparisons between natural soundscapes and silent ones (Uimonen, 2006; Vikman, 2006 & 2009a, in Komppula and Kono, 2012). Tranquil natural settings are often characterised by specific auditory elements, such as the wind passing through leaves and birdsong. This reinforces the idea that silence in nature does not imply a complete absence of sound but rather an opportunity to perceive sounds more clearly within a quiet and slow-paced environment. The natural elements that people perceive as quiet and peaceful, including glimpses through the trees, the colourful leaves, and trees, can be related to the aspect of *fascination* (Kaplan, 1984, p.192, italics added). In fact, Kaplan posited that captivating elements in natural settings, such as leaves, sunlit raindrops, and woods, create a sense of calmness and tranquillity.

The notion of silence in natural environment is particularly compelling, as it enables individuals to detach from the ordinary aspects of life. Indeed, participants in this study frequently noted that listening to nature's silent soundscape enhanced their sensation of being in an entirely different dimension. This aligns with existing literature, suggesting that a sense of *being in a whole other world* can emerge within a rural sound idyll environment (Kaaristo, 2014, p.273, italics added). Findings further indicate that the presence of individuals conversing loudly in such environments can disrupt the experience of stillness in nature. Indeed, these noises in nature have been defined as undesired, meaningless, and loud sounds, in contrast to the more pleasurable and restorative qualities of natural silence (R.M. Schafer, 1977, in Järviluoma et al., 2009). However, it is important to recognize that the perception of silence in nature can symbolise both positive and/or negative experiences. While many individuals find silence calming and immersive, research has also demonstrated that it can evoke feelings of isolation, loneliness or boredom (Tacchi, 2012). Although participants in the present study expressed enjoyment in listening to the silent background of nature, future research could further explore the multifaceted nature of silence in natural environments by examining both its restorative potential and its possible psychological drawbacks.

Walking in nature: a path to reflection and shared experience

The experience of walking in natural environment, whether alone or in a group, facilitates moments of reflection and unique dialogue that further enhance the connection between the individual and their surroundings. As a slow-paced and embodied activity, walking enables individuals to reconnect

with themselves while simultaneously sharing the experience with others. The experience of natural hikers varies in terms of solitude and social interaction, depending on walking distance and personal preferences.

Findings from the present study indicate that walking provides an opportunity for deeper conversations about immediate observations and experiences rather than concerns of everyday life. Similarly, previous research has highlighted that walking with other people can foster emotional closeness, allowing unexpected ways of sharing (Doughty, 2013). Notably, the nature of social interaction while walking differs from other settings. In the current study, participants engaged in conversation while walking, often avoiding direct eye contact as their attention remained directed forward, toward the path and their surroundings. This behavioural pattern aligns with prior research suggesting that reduced eye contact while walking can indicate social distance, while also facilitating the exchange of personal thoughts (Modigliani, 1971). The concept of social distance in this study is referred to as the necessity for individuals to walk in solitude, particularly during multi-day excursions. Allocating time for solitude allows individuals to maintain a healthy balance between social interaction and personal space, thereby facilitating self-reflection and heightened awareness of one's surroundings. Previous studies have emphasised that solo time in nature is beneficial to the individual, with a sense of respite and reflection (Campbell, 2010) along with awareness of the immediate environment (Nicholls, 2008) being key aspects of this experience.

Although moments of silence are often valued for providing space for personal reflection, participants also emphasised that sharing the experience with others can foster meaningful conversations, particularly regarding personal impressions on natural encounters. This observation aligns with findings from Doughty's (2013) study on the social dimension of walking, which highlighted the coexistence of moments of silence and shared sensory appreciation of the natural surroundings. In the present study, participants emphasised the importance of silence in nature as a moment for self-reflection. Unlike the chaotic urban environments, where external stimuli are persistent, walking in nature, characterised by its stillness, offers individuals the ideal mental space for deeper contemplation. This finding aligns with previous research proving that exposure to natural environments enhances self-reflection, particularly concerning personal and life-related concerns (Mayer et al., 2009). Specifically, engaging with nature, whether through walking or simply observing natural settings, has been shown to foster greater introspection compared to urban contexts. These results suggest that natural environments might foster the ideal conditions for self-reflection by reducing external distractions and cultivating a sense of stillness.

In the present study, participants describe walking in nature not only as an experience that fosters presence and simplicity, but also as an activity largely free from social obligations. Apart from basic considerations, such as food, water and navigation, walking required minimal cognitive engagement, allowing individuals to immerse themselves fully in their surroundings. This finding is consistent with another qualitative study (Mau et al., 2021), which suggested that the absence of external obligations enabled participants to engage in reflective thoughts. The simplicity of the walking experience facilitated participants to address social relations and life matters that are often overlooked in daily routines. Additionally, the present study revealed that walking, particularly in small groups, creates social spaces that foster conversation and knowledge exchange, thereby enriching individuals' subjective experience in nature. Similarly, research by Doughty (2013) demonstrated that shared movement and social interaction within therapeutic landscapes contribute to the creation of supportive social spaces, which, in turn, enhance the restorative potential of the experience.

For future research, it would be interesting to explore diverse groups of people, encompassing different age categories and social abilities to observe the variations in their experiences of walking in nature. Moreover, further studies are needed to examine the multifaceted effects of walking in

solitude and in a group setting, and whether a sense of community or belonging to a particular place can be cultivated through solitary engagement or shared experienced. While previous health studies have examined the benefits of nature-based walking therapies for individuals experiencing burnout (Van den Berg & Beute, 2021), there is still a gap in understanding the social dimension of these interventions. Exploring the role of group dynamics in nature-based therapies, such as forest bathing- or therapy, might provide valuable insights into how social interactions influence therapeutic outcomes.

Implication and limitation of further research

These findings demonstrate the complexity of engaging multiple senses while walking in natural environments. This study contributes to existing literature by addressing several gaps. Most studies on nature's restorative properties have been conducted in controlled environments, such as virtual or simulated environments in laboratory settings, using a quantitative approach. In contrast, this study adopts a qualitative methodology in an outdoor setting, aiming to gain insights from the direct experience of walkers in nature. Previous studies have primarily focused on the visual sense when examining the therapeutic qualities of nature. However, an emerging body of literature emphasises the significance of multisensory engagement in nature-based therapeutic experiences. This study contributes to this growing field by paying more attention to other sensory impressions, including sound, smell and touch. Therefore, it covers the gap in existing studies by underscoring the importance of a holistic sensory experience while walking in nature.

More importantly, this study contributes to the existing literature on the therapeutic nature-interaction with the senses by incorporating the context of tourism through the slow adventure activity of walking. The integration of tourism in this research offers a unique perspective, as it facilitates the exploration of nature and its associated benefits, which may potentially transform walking into a touristic activity. Further research is required to develop and implement nature walk trails with the aim of enhancing their accessibility and appeal to both domestic and international visitors. Despite the natural and silent soundscape have been previously explored, this study offers a novel perspective on the therapeutic benefits of natural soundscapes on the experience of walkers. The way individuals engage with their surroundings while walking plays a crucial role in shaping their perception of stillness in nature. Notably, findings suggest that the perception of stillness is largely shaped by visual and auditory stimuli, highlighting the significance of multisensory impressions in affecting the walking experience of tourists.

One of the primary limitations of this study is the lack of diversity among the research sample. In fact, the majority of respondents were from nearby Italian regions, with only a few international participants. In contrast, a stratified sample would have facilitated a more profound exploration into the sensory experiences as well as reasons for travelling to walk in nature. Further research should encompass a more heterogeneous sample, including individuals from diverse age groups and nationalities, thereby ensuring the diversification of the study population while increasing the generalisation of the findings. A further limitation encountered in this study concerns the participants' recruitment phase on the field. The selected research location, being relatively remote within a natural environment, coupled with the timing of the study during a period of low seasonality for tourism, resulted in difficulties in securing interviews. Some days no interviews were conducted as there were no individuals on the trails, especially during weekdays. To mitigate this issue, further studies should conduct a preliminary assessment of the research site and, where possible, collaborate with local organisations and tourism agencies to gain insights into visitor flows throughout the year. Additionally, the time constraints posed a significant limitation to the study. The period of data collection was limited to three weeks, which, although it was sufficient to gather a meaningful

sample, may have limited the scope of the research. Extending the duration of fieldwork could facilitate the acquisition of a more extensive research sample, but also a comprehensive understanding of visitors' sensory engagement with nature.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

The present study sets out to explore the experience of individuals while walking in Italian natural areas, focusing on sensory engagement. Specifically, it sought to examine the sensations and emotions arising from the immediate experience in natural settings, along with the motives of pursuing this experience away from home. The findings showed that the multisensory experience is an intrinsic aspect of the therapeutic benefits of walking in nature, resulting in a deep connection with the surrounding environment. In addressing the research question(s), the results emphasise several elements that affect an individual experience of walking in nature-based environments, such as engaging with different senses, the quiet ambience and ones' motivations.

The analysis uncovered the presence of different sensory informed themes, namely freedom, mindfulness, belonging and nostalgia, correlated with specific (multi) sensory impressions, including sight, sound, smell and touch. This shows that interacting with different senses within a natural environment can raise a range of sensations and emotions, thereby contributing to individuals' perception of the environment as restorative. Furthermore, the experience of stillness in nature was frequently associated with the natural soundscape and quiet background that nature itself provides, thereby emphasising the importance of multisensory elements in enhancing the restorative experience of walking and engaging with nature.

Escape from daily life's stressful routine emerged as a motivational factor that drives people to travel for walking experiences in nature. For instance, participants in this study highlighted the importance of disconnecting and slowing down in order to appreciate life in its simplicity. The restorative effect experienced through nature walks results from the relation between the person and the environment. As an embodied practice, walking emphasises the role of the senses by providing a wide range of sensations and emotions during the movement. Furthermore, encounters among natural environments during a walk can facilitate moments of personal conversations with others as well as self-reflection, which, in turn, deepens the therapeutic effect of nature on people.

In conclusion, the experience of stillness occurs through the multisensory interaction with nature-based settings, where participants described it as quiet, peaceful and calm by referring to visual and sound elements of the natural landscape, such as open views, the colourful trees, birdsongs and the wind. Consequently, walking in nature can not only be considered as a mere physical activity, but rather an immersive experience given by the interaction between humans and the surrounding environment. Therefore, the sensory experience of individuals in nature through the engagement with visual, auditory, olfactory and touch elements, fosters a sense of liberation, nostalgia and mindfulness, thereby enabling individuals to momentarily disengage from the demands of daily life and establish a profound connection with their surroundings.

Unlike previous studies on therapeutic environments, mostly conducted through quantitative research methods, the present study draws attention to sensory embodied experiences by employing a qualitative approach. The findings of this study could be combined in mixed method approaches in order to improve the validity of the same study. In addition, this research contributes to the existing body of literature on wellbeing tourism and slow travel by incorporating individuals' sensory engagement with the environment and the experience of stillness, thereby enhancing the experience of walking in nature as a tourist activity, as it provides restorative effects.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Interview guides

Instructions: Before starting the interview, the researcher should explain that research is being conducted for a master's thesis by briefly mentioning the topic and aim of this interview. The topic is the multi-sensory experience of walking in natural environments and how it affects the wellbeing of tourists. Emphasise the importance of participating in the research by mentioning that participants' answers will be used only for academic purposes. Therefore, the researcher ensures confidentiality and anonymity. Moreover, the researcher should mention that the interviews will be recorded, upon permission given from the participant. Stress the importance of audio recording the conversation in order to help the researcher with data analysis afterwards.

Potential 'general follow-up questions':

- Could you elaborate more on that?
- What do you mean by...?
- Could you give me an example?

Potential 'specific follow-up questions':

- How does it make you feel? ... Why do you think that is?
- What do you like about that place/environment...? Why?
- Did you recall this experience elsewhere?

Before the start of the interview: thank the interviewee for participating and start the recording.

A) Interview questions (English)

Opening questions

- i. How is the walk going so far?
- ii. Are you enjoying the weather today?

1st theme. Immediate experience

- i. How are you feeling right now?
 - a. Follow up question: What kind of positive and/or negative emotions are you experiencing now? If so, explain the reasons why that is.
- ii. What is your preference between a solo walk and a group walk?
 - a. Follow up question: What aspects of walking alone / walking in group do you like most?
- iii. What does walking mean to you?
 - a. Follow up question: Is the natural setting important for you? If yes, in what ways?

Visual perception

- i. What do you think about the surrounding landscape?
 - a. Follow up question: What do you like about it?
 - b. Follow up question: Do you prefer a particular landscape? If yes, which one?
- ii. To what extent does the surrounding landscape affect your wellbeing?

Sound perception

- i. What do you think about the surrounding sounds?
- ii. To what extent does the surrounding sounds affect your wellbeing?
 - a. Follow up question: How do you feel about it? What kinds of feelings and/or sensations arise? (*possible connection to stillness*)
- iii. What do you think about external “disturbing” noises in nature while walking?
 - b. Follow up question: Do you think they have an impact on your experience? If yes how.

Follow-up question: What other sensory impressions stand out to you on this walk?

Embodied aspect

- i. How are you feeling in your body right now?
 - a. Follow up question: Is this a common feeling for you? If not, what’s about walking here that helps you feel that way? (*possible connection to stillness*)

2nd theme. Motivations

- i. What is your favourite environment for walking?
- ii. How does this experience differ from home?
 - a. Follow up question: What is the difference between walking in your neighbourhood and taking a daytrip to another region/country?
 - b. Follow up question: What motivates you to travel to another place to enjoy walking in nature?

Wellbeing in the long-term

- i. Would you say that walking in nature provides benefits for your wellbeing? If yes, how?

3rd theme: The experience of silence and stillness

(Note: include only if the interviewee has mentioned stillness/quiet/silence etc.)

- i. What do you associate silence with? (OR) What does silence mean to you?
 - a. Clarification: How would you imagine / describe it?
 - b. Follow up question: Is this something you can experience often in your life? “If yes, in what ways?” (OR) “If no, what factors prevent you from feeling it?”

B) Interview questions (Italian)

Domande di apertura

- i. Come sta andando la camminata?
- ii. Ti stai godendo il tempo di oggi? "O" Il meteo è perfetto oggi, non credi?

Primo tema. Esperienza diretta

- i. Come ti senti in questo momento?
 - a. Domanda a seguire: Quali emozioni/sensazioni che sia positive o negative stai provando in questo momento? Se è così, quali sono i principali motivi che ti hanno portato a sentirti così?
- ii. Cosa preferisci fra una camminata in solitaria e in gruppo?
 - a. Domanda a seguire: Quali sono gli aspetti più interessanti / che ti piacciono di più fra camminare da solo / in gruppo?
- iii. Cosa significa per te camminare (come attività)?
 - a. Domanda a seguire: Durante una camminata, è importante l'aspetto "naturale" per te? Se sì in che modo? A quali elementi fai riferimento?

Percezione visiva

- i. Cosa ne pensi del paesaggio circostante?
 - a. Domanda a seguire: Cosa ti piace in particolare?
 - b. Domanda a seguire: Hai una preferenza per un particolare paesaggio? Se sì, quale?
- ii. In che modo il paesaggio circostante influisce sul tuo benessere fisico e/o mentale?

Percezione uditiva

- i. Cosa ne pensi dell'ambiente sonoro (suoni/rumori) circostante?
- ii. In che modo questi suoni influiscono sul tuo benessere fisico e/o mentale?
 - a. Domanda a seguire: Come ti fa sentire questo ambiente? Quali emozioni e/o sensazioni ti provoca? *(Possibile collegamento con il concetto di tranquillità e silenzio)*
- iii. Cosa ne pensi dei rumori esterni che senti in natura quando cammini?
 - a. Domanda a seguire: Pensi che questi abbiano un impatto sulla tua esperienza? Se sì, in che modo.

Domanda a seguire: Quali altri elementi / aspetti sensoriali riesci a distinguere durante questa camminata?

Percezione corporea

- i. Che sensazioni stai provando a livello corporeo? "OR" Come ti senti nel tuo corpo in questo momento?
 - a. Domanda a seguire: È una sensazione che provi spesso? Se la risposta è no, cosa c'è di speciale nel camminare qui che ti aiuta a sentirti in quel modo? *(Possibile collegamento con il concetto di tranquillità e silenzio)*

Secondo Tema. Motivazioni

- i. Qual è il tuo ambiente / posto preferito per camminare?
- ii. In che modo questa esperienza è differente rispetto a casa?
 - a. Domanda a seguire: Qual è la differenza fra camminare nel tuo vicinato e spostarsi in giornata in un'altra regione/stato?
 - b. Domanda a seguire: Cosa ti spinge a viaggiare in un'altra regione/stato per fare un'esperienza di camminata nella natura?

Benessere a lungo termine

- i. Pensi che camminare nella natura possa portare dei benefici al tuo benessere (mentale e/o fisico)? Se sì, come?

Terzo tema. Silenzio e quiete come esperienza

(Nota: includere solo se l'intervistato ha menzionato concetti come silenzio, quiete, tranquillità o pace)

- i. A cosa associ la parola silenzio? "O" Cosa significa il silenzio per te?
 - a. Chiarificazione: Come te lo immagini?
 - b. Domanda a seguire: È qualcosa che solitamente riesci a provare nella vita di tutti i giorni? Se sì, in che modo? "O" Se no, quali fattori ti impediscono di provarlo / sentirlo?